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THE SALE OF SLAVERY:
MEMORY, CULTURE, AND THE RENEWAL OF AMERICA, 1877-1920

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In memory of
Grandpa Bill & Grandpa Stan

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I ask how and why slavery was sold: as performance, narrative, image, and object. By *selling* slavery, I mean to name the historical and cultural processes that crystalized the myth and symbols of the antebellum slave plantation into cultural forms and gave those forms particular values and uses for modern life. In the fifty years after the abolition of slavery, when Reconstruction remained unfinished and Jim Crow prevailed, the icons of the plantation proliferated in the mass cultural economy rising in the urban northeast—amplified with electricity, decorated in the latest style, automated with industrial technology. Whereas previous scholars have considered this memory of slavery as a reflection of the racial politics of national reconciliation or of anti-modern nostalgia, I argue that it allured for resolving the dislocations of contemporary historical change into a modernist sense of national and personal renewal. Yet behind the modern surfaces was a longer history of production in which white and black cultural entrepreneurs and workers made competing claims to the symbolic values that adhered to the myth of the old plantation. At stake was not only how the image and idea of slavery would be represented in the present, but also how race itself would be reproduced during the tumultuous cultural consolidation of the corporate industrial economy.

The history of selling slavery explains the racial politics that tied the production of memory to cultural transformation. How was the remembrance of slavery put into the service of renewing the nation and hastening the coming of the machine age? I approach the problem by focusing on the culture industries that transformed the racial iconography of the old plantation into cutting-edge cultural products: the amusement industry that turned the old blackface minstrel show into spectacular plantation theatricals in the 1890s; the literary industry in which W. E. B. Du Bois shaped the critical value and material form of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903);

the camera technology that enabled the circulation of ostensibly timeless images of the “old South” in private snapshots, metropolitan art galleries, and the mass postcard trade after the turn of the century; and the toy industry that designed and marketed dancing blackface slaves as vehicles of mechanical pedagogy during World War I. In these products, culture industries sought to recuperate, in their own ways, the racist motifs of an eradicated past to express their transformative social power, giving race (and racism) a modern materiality and sensuousness.

Yet the history of selling slavery also affords a critical view of the cultural dynamics of racial formation before the Harlem Renaissance and before D. W. Griffith’s white supremacist blockbuster, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). For not only would culture industries depend on the labor of African Americans; those African American performers, writers, and models would stamp the production and sometimes the product with their own visions of modernist renewal and claims for equity. In addition to locating African American performers and authors in the formation of a mass cultural economy, I show how they sought to shape, transform, and contest the cultural work of race-making.

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Chris Dingwall

Chicago & Toronto

INTRODUCTION

On the plain of reality, as it were, we gaze across a vale of desire to the heights of illusion, to the delectable hill—and see there—on the Southern plantation.

—Francis Pendleton Gaines¹

[W]hy will this Soul of White Folk,—this modern Prometheus,—hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past?

—W. E. B. Du Bois²

Human dependence and servitude, the vanishing point of the culture industry...

—Theodor W. Adorno³

You could not walk far in New York City without seeing slavery for sale. For Francis Pendleton Gaines, a young Virginian pursuing his doctorate at Columbia University in the early 1920s, it was everywhere he looked. On Broadway, theaters staged plantation revues and restaurants advertised Dixie dinners in electric lights. On Coney Island, daytrippers rode the Old Virginia Reel rollercoaster and then got their pictures taken at “make-it-while-you-wait photograph galleries” in front of a painted plantation backdrop. Music stores displayed an “almost inexhaustible” supply of plantation ballads in their windows; cinemas projected a “plantation atmosphere” on their silver screens. Cotton fields loomed above on cigarette billboards in “an ambitious presentation in colors,” and mammys waited in kitchen cupboards in the form of “a nationally known brand of pancake flour.” The antebellum Southern slave plantation had become more than a peculiarly regional motif: it resonated throughout American culture; its “potency...in our general thinking” compelled a scholarly reckoning.⁴

¹ Francis Pendleton Gaines, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 1.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 44, 52.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” (1975), trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 91.

⁴ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 11, 4, 10, 12.

In this dissertation I ask how and why slavery was sold: as performance, narrative, image, and object. By *selling* slavery, I mean to name the historical and cultural processes that crystalized the old plantation myth into cultural forms and gave them particular values and uses for modern life. In the fifty years after the abolition of slavery, when Reconstruction remained unfinished and Jim Crow prevailed, the icons of the plantation returned to the mass cultural economy rising in the urban northeast—amplified with electricity, decorated in the latest style, automated with industrial technology. As Gaines saw it, the old plantation seemed to permeate everyday life from the city street to private thought; from our vantage we can recognize the early outlines of our own modern culture somehow built out of the anachronistic remainders of an eradicated past. Yet behind the modern surfaces was a longer history in which white and black cultural entrepreneurs and workers contested the claim to the symbolic values that adhered to the myth of the old plantation. At stake was not only how the history of slavery would be represented in the present, but also how race itself would be reproduced during the tumultuous cultural consolidation of the corporate industrial economy. Thus selling slavery brings into view the racial politics that tied the production of memory to cultural transformation. How were the racist motifs of the old plantation put into the service of renewing the nation and hastening the coming of a machine age?

Historians have persuasively explained the prominence of the plantation myth in turn-of-the-century American culture as a reflection of the prevailing politics of national reunion. It was by fashioning memories of slavery that Americans—North and South, black and white—contested the very terms of imagining what Lincoln announced as the nation’s “new birth in freedom.” As Kirk Savage observes, wartime abolition required not only new political institutions and legal forms but also “a reinvention of the very meaning and practice of liberty” at

the level of everyday life and consciousness. The production of a memory was integral to the cultural politics of Reconstruction. Abolitionists, Yankee artists and intellectuals, and the formerly enslaved debated the meaning of slavery as a trauma to be forgotten or as a sin to be redeemed by granting the freed unique purchase on the nation's wealth and polity. The old plantation myth, however, expressed a conservative reaction against the wholesale social, political, and legal revolution that abolition set in motion; its iconography served the racist regime of Jim Crow that subordinated the political, civil, and economic standing of African Americans through political disenfranchisement, debt peonage, and the lynch mob. In the plantation romance, white Southerners could believe that black freedom was itself an aberration from a timeless, natural order of race and labor. According to this ideology, African American citizens were seen fit for work only as sharecroppers on the real plantations of a resurgent Southern cotton industry—enthusiastically financed by Northern capital—and for contemplation only in the fantastic plantations of the white mind.⁵

By the 1920s the triumph of the old plantation and the racist ideology it stood for was so complete that a Virginian such as Gaines could feel at home in the bustling Yankee metropolis. But what made the old plantation such a hit among the window shoppers and thrill seekers of New York? How did the denizens of urban industrial centers in the North come to embrace the plantation legend of the Old and New South? The question is significant, for not only would the white Northern middle classes abandon the ideals of abolition; they also made racism a seemingly intractable part of a daily life that was undergoing a tumultuous transformation into

⁵ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3. For the ideological function of the plantation myth for the formation of a political economy of the New South, see, for starters, Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). For postbellum debates among African Americans, from established elites to the newly freed, about the meaning of slavery in relation to ideologies of racial progress and national belonging, see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 9.

the electric and mechanical world of mass production and consumption. Of course, racism and practices of racial segregation had deep roots in the urban industrial North, especially among the restive white working class.⁶ The postbellum bourgeois consumer no less than the antebellum artisan or wage worker, historians argue, found comfort in imaginary plantations, even if they did not directly benefit from the profits of the New York Cotton Exchange. “In the Gilded Age of teeming cities, industrialization, and political skullduggery, Americans needed another world to live in,” as David Blight eloquently puts it; “they yearned for a more pleasing past in which to find slavery, the war, and Reconstruction.”⁷ In addition relief from any obligation to African Americans, white Northerners received from the old plantation what Frederic Jameson might call a “fantasy bribe.” As the abstract systems of corporate industry reached further into everyday life, the wash of racist nostalgia allured for enchanting an everyday life that to many people now seemed “unreal.”⁸ Aunt Jemima, above all, became an icon of the age not only for naturalizing the Jim Crow social order but also for adding an aura of authenticity to machine-made food.⁹

Yet Gaines’s survey warrants a finer examination of the economy of the old plantation myth, its symbolic economy of compensation and its material supports in the political economy

⁶ See Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: the Negro in the Free States* (1961; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1990; New York: Verso, 2003).

⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 222. Recent studies have more critically analyzed the creation of a Southern past within the context of consumer society, although they take the perspective of Southerners responding to and attempting to manipulate the anxieties of Northern consumers for their own interests. See Reiko Hillyer, *Designing Dixie: Tourism, Memory, and Urban Space in the New South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2015); Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners in the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

⁸ For the psychology of compensation and the function of the “fantasy bribe” in consumer culture, see Frederic Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979), 144. In contrast to many cultural historians of consumer society, Jameson goes on to propose a method that accounts for the Utopian element in mass cultural products that does not reduce it to the ideological manipulation it helps to perform. For the anxious feelings of unreality that marked contemporary responses to the rise of corporate industry by the urban bourgeoisie, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁹ See M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: the Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

of cultural transformation. What if Northerners were not wholly capitulating to a Southern Lost Cause, and instead participated in fashioning a new racial order on the material grounds of a burgeoning mass consumer economy? What if they were not mystified by Aunt Jemima, but were as attracted to machine-made blackness as they were to machine-made food? Indeed it is hard to imagine waiting in line for the Old Virginia Reel rollercoaster, say, while also believing you will be escaping to another, more serene world. To indulge in fantasies of the old plantation meant going out to a cinema, mailing a postcard, playing with toys, and engaging with other bearers of commodity relations, industrial technology, and corporate bureaucracy.

Racism was reproduced in the modern world because it was sold. By examining the production and sensory qualities of their cultural forms, I argue that the racialized symbols of the slave plantation did not so much represent a past as furnish material for consumers to reassemble the stuff of socioeconomic change into a sense of national and personal renewal: the production of memory went hand-in-hand with the production of the modern.¹⁰ Thus to study the old plantation challenges us to consider it not as an anachronism surviving within American cultural modernity but as part of the apparatus by which people were invited to constitute the modern for themselves. But if rollercoasters were meant to train your body to endure the trials of industrial machinery, how would the Old Virginia Reel entice you to endure the trials of the rollercoaster? How were figures of black slaves made to perform the art of modernization?¹¹

¹⁰ For the production of memory as a sociohistorical process, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995). My own investment in material culture as a privileged site for examining the cultural production of memory and everyday life as phenomena at once aesthetic and socioeconomic draws from Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *AHR* 110.4 (Oct. 2005): 1015-45; Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 1-22. Notwithstanding the risk of conflating materiality with "dialogical" textuality, see also Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983): 23-71.

¹¹ John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

The Ultra-Modern Old Plantation

You “cannot go far in this ultra-modern world without seeing tokens of the [plantation’s] survival in the public consciousness.” Gaines was a typical witness to the “ultra-modern world.” Born in Virginia in 1862, and pursuing a career as a leading Southern educator until his death in 1963, Gaines could enjoy the irony of the “survival” of a Southern tradition in the heart of bustling Manhattan. Yet he only briefly paused to consider “[t]heories that may account for the relative power of plantation concept in the popular imagination.” To him the appeal was beside his point, and wholly obvious. Its tableau of masters and servants, white-columned mansions and expansive cotton fields, appealed to an “innate American love of feudalism”; its presentation of the “plantation black” furnished a “folk figure” that embodied the “simple,” “rustic,” “instinctive,” “irrational,” “spontaneous,” and “artless”; and its remove from living history in a “misty, heroic long ago” preserved a tradition within the “consistent development” of the country. It was a reflection of everything that the “ultra-modern world” lacked: “The plantation romance remains our chief social idyl of the past [*sic*];...less material, less hurried, less prosaically egalitarian, less futile, richer in picturesqueness, festivity, in realized pleasure that recked not of hope or fear or unrejoicing labor [*sic*].”¹²

The scene that Gaines described certainly could have been found in the tradition of landscape paintings that rendered the power of the planter class into a placid view of social order.¹³ Indeed, Gaines was perhaps uninterested in theorizing further about the “power” such a vision held in the popular consciousness because he was under its sway. Gaines believed in the plantation romance, and in the ideology of race and reunion it stood for, for the way it reconciled

¹² Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 11, 2-4.

¹³ See the essays in Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffus, *The Landscape of Slavery: the Plantation in American Art* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); John Michael Vlach, *The Planter’s Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Southern tradition with modern progress. Gaines was hardly an arch white supremacist; he betrayed his liberalism—and the shortcomings of contemporary liberalism—by attempting to find an arbitrary middle ground between the abolitionist critique and the proslavery defense that together had occluded an “accurate” representation of the past. On the one hand, Gaines readily hailed the distance between the present from the discredited “ethical standards of another age” held by the slave regime. On the other hand, he defended the reality of the “happy and loyal” slave, the “naturalness” of black subservience, the basic humanity of the master class.¹⁴ Here Gaines exhibited the contradictions in the spirit of national reconciliation and in the progressive ideology of the New South. For white Southern proponents of national reunion, from booster Henry Grady to historian Ulrich B. Phillips, the plantation order of race and labor could be revived as a model for the cotton industry while the moral crime of slavery itself was left behind. In this way the plantation “system” and its racial hierarchy could be recuperated as an “engine” of progress. Even from the prevailing Southern perspective, then, the plantation tradition was enlisted perform a modernizing function. Although Gaines candidly acknowledged the plantation tradition as a “fancy,” it was one he himself could savor as a Southerner and as a modern.¹⁵

Yet the reproduction of this scene for ultra-modern New Yorkers evoked a deeper set of transactions through which the “long ago” would be revived amid the rush of “consistent development.” Gaines obtained his clearest picture of the plantation—indeed, the image that

¹⁴ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 232, 224, 234. For instance, he chided both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Thomas Nelson Page for “distorting” the image of race relations on the plantation with abolitionist sentiment and retrospective nostalgia, respectively, he believed that “it seems entirely probable that the average black on the Southern estate was, in moderate degree, happy and loyal” (224). Even Hart, as Gaines could not resist to mention, “smack[ed] his lips over the thought of Southern cooking” in his *Slavery and Abolition* (1906), and affirmed the humane conditions of “good” plantations (170n37, 228). See also Savage, *Standing Soldier*.

¹⁵ In fact he would return from his education in the ultra-modern world to lead the education of fellow New Southerners as president of Wake Forest College and then Washington & Lee University, chronicle the life of Robert E. Lee, and amass a sizable collection of over two-hundred walking canes. For biographical information on Gaines I have relied on Henry S. Stroupe, “Francis Pendleton Gaines,” in William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); retrieved online: http://www.wfu.edu/history/HST_WFU/gaines.htm (accessed June 2, 2014).

opened his dissertation—from “a handsomely illustrated advertisement of a phonograph company”:

The scene represented an old negro who sat on a little eminence and gazed wistfully across a valley. On the opposite hill the world of actuality merged into a cloud-like vision, the semblance of the ex-slave’s dream: the old plantation; a great mansion; exquisitely gowned ladies and courtly gentlemen moving with easy grace upon the broad veranda behind stalwart columns; surrounding the yard an almost illimitable stretch of white cotton; darkies singingly at work in the fields; negro quarters, off on one side, around which little pickaninnies tumbled in glad frolic.¹⁶

It was, to be sure, a perfect representation of the view of the planter, old and new: a former slave fantasizing about his own bondage, a “glad” labor that was the fulcrum around which gowned ladies and courtly gents and their “illimitable” plentitude turned. For the ultra-modern consumer, however, the “old negro” performed additional symbolic work. The “dream” of the ex-slave was available for purchase in the form of a phonograph—a technology of a newfound music industry that transformed the embodied performance of a musician into a highly-reproducible commodity. If the memory of the old plantation would compensate for the material, hurried, prosaic, and unrejoicing modernity, it required both material and symbolic mediation to bring the dream forth into the present. In the advertisement the ex-slave might be said to have stood in for the phonograph itself, just as the phonograph stood in for the “darkies singingly at work.” Thus Gaines could not help but figure the slave not as an anti-modern survival but as a necessary supplement by which the music industry compensated for a signal feature of the ultra-modern: the commercial and technological alienation of memory from life.¹⁷

That the advertised phonograph was most likely a recording of a black ragtime performer or a white musician singing in vocal blackface not only shifts the origin of the “long ago” from a real plantation to the Northern cultural marketplace; it also granted the black slave a crucial role

¹⁶ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 1.

¹⁷ For “the curse of modernity” defined as “the alienation of work from life,” see Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *AHR* 100.1 (Feb. 1995), 5.

in mediating the modern identity of the nation. That an “artless” slave would reflect the cultural identity of the nation was an idea with a genealogy than ran contrary to proslavery ideology. In 1849, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker had declared that the slave narrative was the “one portion of our permanent literature, if literature it may be called, which is wholly indigenous and original.” “[A]ll the original romance of Americans is in” their narratives, “not in the white man’s novel.”¹⁸ For Harriet Beecher Stowe and other abolitionist writers of the 1840s and 1850s, not only the nation’s unoriginal culture but also its complicity in the inhumanity of slavery could be redeemed by listening to the romance of black story and song. During the age of emancipation, Lucy McKim, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and other abolitionist cultural practitioners transcribed, reproduced, and performed the religious songs of the formerly enslaved at once to provide the white listener with more authentic and original culture and to hasten the fulfillment of black freedom: there is a “wealth of material still awaiting,” as McKim wrote, for “the stores of [these] plantation[s] were by no means exhausted.”¹⁹ To incorporate the voice of the enslaved into their humanitarian discourse of slave emancipation, as Ronald Radano argues, abolitionists “min[ed] the use-value of the black body’s song to enact an exchange for white self-completion.” By gesturing across these differences abolitionists invited the nation to transcend them and “‘hear’ its collective slave past.”²⁰

Slavery was America’s original sin; yet it was also the sin that made America original. If abolitionists had sought to tie the consumption of “original” values of the voice of the slave to the ending of slavery, by the 1920s the ultra-modern old plantation allowed you to enjoy its

¹⁸ Theodore Parker, “The American Scholar” (c. 1849), in *The American Scholar*, ed. George Willis Cooke (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907), 37, 1.

¹⁹ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickford Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867), i, x, xi, xxi.

²⁰ Ronald Radano, “Denoting Difference: the Writing of the Slave Spirituals,” *Critical Inquiry* 22.3 (Spring 1996), 523, 529.

riches as if slavery had never ended—or did not need to. “[T]he horrible visions of abolition frenzy were largely forgotten,” Gaines wrote, and the memory of “[s]lavery...softened until whatever may have been evil was regarded as accidental.”²¹ Yet the identity between the song and story of the enslaved and the futurity of the nation persisted across Northern cultural discourse. In an 1894 issue of Harper’s, the editor endorsed the Czech composer Antonin Dvorak’s proclamation that “the music of the slaves on the Southern plantations” would provide the foundation for a future national music, “a folk-song field which is rich and American.”²² In the phonograph advertisement, the figure of the slave seemed to stand in as much for the consumer as for the phonograph. “It is not a far-fetched analogy,” as Gaines wryly put it, “to consider the gray-haired darkey, with longing in his eyes, symbolic of the American public.”²³

But what disturbed him more than abolitionists—and behind them, the actual enslaved—was blackface minstrelsy and the unruly commercial power it represented. In the antebellum era, as Eric Lott argues, blackface minstrels imitated the songs and dances of the black slave in order to stage a dynamic of “love and left” whereby their white working class audiences could identify with the authentic pre-industrial culture of plantation while affirming their difference as free white men.²⁴ Although he duly devoted a chapter to its influence, Gaines attempted to cordon off blackface minstrelsy from the mainstream of the plantation tradition for its “utter disassociation from, plantation darkies [sic].” Despite being the “baldest travesty,” the “world of burnt cork” reached audiences through permanent runs in the theaters of “our larger cities,” numerous touring troupes, “amateur and private performance,” and “publishing houses” that churned out

²¹ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 64, 63.

²² [Henry Mills Alden,] “Editor’s Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 88.527 (April 1894), 803.

²³ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 1.

²⁴ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

blackface sketches, plays, and make-up kits by the tens of thousands.²⁵ For Gaines, as for many contemporary observers, blackface threatened to disrupt the very difference between white and black, the authentic and the artificial that the figure of the black slave was imagined to affirm. Although blackface is often taken as shorthand for any kind of anti-black stereotype in American culture, blackface was a mobile and volatile form whose construction and value mutated as it moved from stage to phonographs, photographs, cell animation, live film, and myriad other cultural novelties.²⁶ As Gaines saw it, blackface disrupted the cultural system of the ultra-modern old plantation for severing the Southern tradition from the New South, and the surveillance of the plantation from the planter's eye. Rather than provide Americans with real culture, and whites with real blackness, burnt-cork offered an artificial blackness that on closer inspection would reveal only themselves: a blank (white) slate.

Because he could conceive of the plantation as both an organic tradition and as a "power" in "consciousness," Gaines was continued to serve as a guide to the plantation "tradition" across several generations of American cultural studies, despite the racist ideology that shaped his thought.²⁷ Yet the closer Gaines examined its ultra-modern surfaces, the more he exposed the counter claims that competed with New Southerners for ownership over the old plantation. Around the figure of the black slave, as Gaines perceived, there revolved a system of differences that attempted to settle the identities not only of black and white, North and South, slavery and

²⁵ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 95-96.

²⁶ In addition to Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, see Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Nicholas Sammond, *The Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

²⁷ The citational history of Gaines's dissertation suggests how significant his research and interpretation has been to our understanding of slavery in American myth and memory from the very beginnings of American studies. See Vernon L. Pennington, *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols. (1927), 2:29; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 281n19; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 168n73; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Myth Making* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 185; William Van De Burg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture*; Stephen A. Smith, *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind*, 16; Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, esp. 198n7; Kimberley Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 15-16, 18.

mastery, but also of artifice and authenticity, automatism and agency, tradition and progress, myth and history—and could do so in manifold combinations.²⁸ Although this system could claim no origin in the consciousness of those who witnessed or experienced American slavery, it held meaning and value precisely as a “memory”: the black slave was a figure of racial difference *and* temporal difference, a seemingly incongruous holdover in the “ultra-modern” that enabled a symbolic commerce with the “lost” old plantation. It was a memory whose symbolic commerce depended on a real commerce, and Gaines’s survey of the plantation tradition invariably registered this “material unconscious.”²⁹ It was a memory, then, that was itself marked by history, if not by slavery as such then by the history of slavery’s representation in the cultural marketplace. Belying its claims to traditional origins was an economic genealogy, its roots tangled not only in the politics of memory but also the politics of cultural transformation.

The Mine and the Stamp Mill

Gaines perhaps saw more than he realized when he enumerated the sights of the old plantation amid New York’s hustle and bustle. What emerges from his text—despite Gaines’s

²⁸ My thinking on the relationship of culture to ideology follows specifically from Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 150-95; and generally from Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973): 193-233.

²⁹ Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996). The intimate relationship between modernity and memory has been the subject of extensive scholarly examination, in which mass culture, whether conceived of as an economic system or popular media, has been the key mediator. For the “coeval” rise of nostalgic affect and mass culture, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 16. For mass cultural media deployed as metaphor, prosthetic, and mode of remembrance, see, respectively, Alison Winter, *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Matt K. Matsuda, *Memory of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Gaines was certainly studying—and participating—in what Eric Hobsbawm called the invention of tradition. See “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 263-308. For Hobsbawm, not unlike for Gaines, traditions are produced by the state and by social groups (immigrants, classes) to lay competing claims on membership to civil society—a conception of mass production that (uncharacteristically for Hobsbawm) takes the means of production and consumption in the cultural sphere largely for granted.

own efforts of containment—is the social power that wrapped the old plantation onto the gleaming surfaces of the modern. Remembrance of slavery on such a scale required institutions of cultural production—and at the turn of the century such institutions were increasingly organized as corporate industries dedicated to make a profit. As they proliferated these culture industries gained a collective presence in American life. Their wealth of commodities promised both emancipatory breaks from traditional authorities and preservation of beloved pasts, more democratic access to the means of aesthetic representation and the prospect of a unitary culture for all classes and ethnicities; yet it also reified those very processes, granting corporate industrial capitalism greater presence in everyday life.³⁰

In 1944 critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (then exiled in the United States) termed this interlocking system the Culture Industry, which by then seemed to have not only taken over the manufacture of cultural products but also robbed consumers of any autonomous individuality.³¹ Cultural historians have tempered this totalizing view, preferring instead to focus on cultural industries as formations-in-process comprising particular institutions, aesthetic forms, and shifting social relations among entrepreneurs, cultural workers, and consumers. Nevertheless, culture industry (if not The Culture Industry) remains a vital category of historical analysis. In addition to naming a specific formation of cultural production and consumption, it also provides a framework to examine how these formations shaped the horizon

³⁰ See Lears, *No Place of Grace*; James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1973; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003); Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hull & Wang, 1982); Larzar Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking, 1966); Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: the Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Knopf, 1959).

³¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (1944/1969; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 94-136; and Adorno, “The Culture Industry Reconsidered.”

of modern experience.³² Indeed, analysis of cultural industry puts the “modern” in critical view. More than signifying a quantitative and qualitative difference between past and present (more telephone wires and railroad lines, less coherent sense of space and time), the modern marks the material conditions and social power that produced this new order and cast its drive for unceasing change as a form of progress and even of freedom. When a postcard manufacturer sold a photo of the “Old South” or a publisher sold a book of “plantation folklore,” then, they were also seeking to bend, in their own ways, the habits of mind and body to an industrial process of cultural production that would bring capital in command of the nation’s renewal.

In addition to phonograph advertisements and blackface minstrelsy, Gaines registered the power of the culture industry most vibrantly in his survey of the career of Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908). Harris was born to a poor family in rural Georgia, but seized the chance to learn a trade by working the printing press of a local planter during the Civil War. In addition to the trade he learned the folklore of the enslaved who worked on the same plantation. For Harris the war contained both the future beyond the plantation and a treasured past forever lost to abolition. He distilled these dual yearnings in *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings: the Folk-Lore of the Old South* (1881), which expressed the typical New South formula of nostalgia for the social relations of the slave plantation with an eye to national reunion and material progress. Of course, Harris wrote to express his own deeply-felt conviction to foster national reunion by overturning

³² For the culture industry as phenomenon and critical category in American history, see James W. Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry,” in Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 291-317; and Michael Denning, “The End of Mass Culture,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 2 parts: no. 37 (Spring 1990): 4-18; and no. 38 (Fall 1990): 63-67. For pertinent historiographical examples, see Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997); Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1994); David Nasaw, *Going Out: the Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

the remaining residues of abolitionism and Yankee commerce from the old plantation myth; he framed his work, with studied rural awkwardness, as “a curiously sympathetic supplement to Mrs. Stowe’s wonderful defense of slavery as it existed in the South,” and from the “intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage.”³³ Harris’s genius, as Gaines gleaned, was to disavow both the sin of slavery and the mimicry of blackface while reconstructing an aura of authenticity around the voice and body of the enslaved on behalf of the white South: he repurposed the cultural use-value of the slave to redeem white Americans not for the end of freeing black people but for restoring the social bonds of racial paternalism.

When it reached Gaines’s eyes, those at once of a Southerner in New York and of a New Yorker consuming the South, Harris’s folklore appeared as an anticipation of the electrified plantations of Broadway and Coney Island. “Uncle Remus did more than tell stores,” Gaines argued; “he opened the door widely, completely, to a spacious chamber of literary values, the wealth of which was made available for those who had the capacity to see it.”³⁴ Gaines touched on the economic dimension of *Uncle Remus* that Harris himself would not have denied. As Harris presented it, the plantation tradition was not simply an image of a social idyll but a kind of economic space where a Northern reader might invest his or her time in exchange for “values.” While he noted the romantic value of the plantation tradition delivered through the “winsome figure of the old darkey,” Gaines marveled at Harris’s management of the plantation “material”: “Harris spread more Uncle Remus over the pages of many magazines and of a dozen volumes,

³³ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: the Folk-lore of the Old South* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1881), 4. The awkward formulation expressed a canny sense of cultural politics. For Harris, because Stowe distilled her anti-slavery critique into the sentimental portrayal of the martyred slave Tom and his cruel overseer Legree, she left intact the rule of humane paternalism that governed the relation between master and slave. Of course, Stowe’s point was that a society founded on the ownership of human beings corrupted everyone within it, from the sensitive slave owner Augustine St. Clare to the Northern reader wearing slave-made cotton.

³⁴ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 74.

meantime reproducing the old epoch in other forms of stories.”³⁵ Gaines might have gone on to list the proliferation of Uncle Remus illustrations, figurines, commemorative coins, and other ephemera. Harris himself encouraged this industry, writing eager correspondence from his Atlanta offices to editors in New York and Boston on letterhead featuring his signature Brer Rabbit logo. It was an economy, in his eyes, without limit. He urged Southern writers to turn the “untouched, undeveloped” plantation material of the South into cultural capital that could be traded in Northern literary markets. “[T]hey must be mined,” Harris instructed. “They must be run through the stamp mill.”³⁶

Yet whatever privileged access he held to the “mine”—his own memory of overhearing the stories of the enslaved—to secure and exploit its value he depended on the reproductive powers of the “stamp mill”—Appleton’s, Harper’s, the Century, and other publishing firms with which he was constantly negotiating. Indeed the output of the “stamp mill” took on lives of their own as creatures of marketplace. Of course, Harris himself had abstracted the experience of the enslaved into an epistemological object: “folklore,” a proto-ethnographic “study in negro character.”³⁷ Yet he would both cultivate and rue his Northern success, where the ultra-modern old plantation beguiled precisely for its spatial and temporal detachment from the South. Without mentioning the book’s famous author, for instance, a critic for the Arts & Crafts design journal *Brush & Pencil* expressed her delight in deciphering the *art nouveau* cover for Harris’s *Plantation Pageants* (1899; fig. I.1):

There is a clever one by E. Boyd Smith, of Paris, which amuses us and arouses a tremendous curiosity. In the lower left-hand corner of this tan cover is a child’s profile,

³⁵ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 74.

³⁶ As C. Vann Woodward observes, Harris likely wrote these lines across from Henry Grady, then editor of the *Constitution*, who “exhort[ed] the South to exploit her ‘mountains stored with exhaustless treasures’”; Grady and Harris quoted in C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1951; Baton Rouge, 1971), 166. Woodward repeated Harris’s material metaphor without noting the common material conditions that enabled it.

³⁷ Harris, *Uncle Remus*, 4.

and a tiny hand holding a twig, on which is perched a cawing blackbird; up above, to the right, listening intently, are two little white children, and one unmistakable pickaninny, with pigtails on end and eyes glaring excitedly, all in profile. What has all this to do with “Plantation Pageants”? Only the book will tell.³⁸

Here the plantation folklore that “the book will tell” was less important than the way it moved across time and space—from a Georgian “mine” to a Parisian art studio to the literary “stamp mill” to the hands of a reader in New York or Boston or Chicago. Rather than provide an escape from the currents of modernity, the plantation pageant was absorbed into the culture of “chic” that was fashioned out of those currents. Here, too, the plantation “pickaninny” performed its service as an “unmistakable” sign of difference and empty silhouette, an identity distinctly black and wholly American. But now its treasured values were entirely alienated from its original source.³⁹ It is perhaps fitting that at the end of his career, the famous Harris would imagine himself a victim of his own creation, indentured to a slick itinerant salesman: *Wally Wanderoon and His Story-Telling Machine*.⁴⁰

That Harris felt mastered by the literary industry would have found him few sympathizers among the African American authors who found their own literary representations of plantation folklore overshadowed and overdetermined by the staggering commercial success of Uncle Remus. In 1889 African American literary critic William S. Scarborough correctly likened plantation folklore to a “composite photograph” that “is never found in real life.”⁴¹ Like a photograph—or a phonograph, or an advertisement—Uncle Remus presented at once an illusion of a memory and a materialization of that illusion. As we shall see in chapter 3, Harris not only endorsed photography as a modern art; he proposed the Southern plantation as its natural subject.

³⁸ Edna Harris, “New Book Covers,” *Brush and Pencil* 5.3 (Dec. 1899), 123.

³⁹ See Evans, *Before Cultures*.

⁴⁰ Joel Chandler Harris, *Wally Wanderoon and His Story-Telling Machine* (New York: McClure & Phillips, 1903). For an apt reading of Harris and *Wally*, see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 142-44, although she brackets the economic context in her discussion of Harris and of children’s racial play more generally.

⁴¹ William S. Scarborough, “Negro Dialect in Fiction,” *The Unitarian Review* 32.1 (July 1889), 78-79.

His ambivalence toward modernity suggests the extent to which the success of the old plantation in the Northern marketplace depended on the success of that marketplace to transform the old plantation to their own ends—and of consumer society to penetrate and disrupt traditional Southern spaces.⁴² Indeed the “composite” assembly of the old plantation was part of the allure for Northerners undergoing their own renewal. For a generation of American moderns—T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound among them—Uncle Remus fascinated precisely as a tangible abstraction of racial difference that claimed an authentic origin while circulating freely in markets, mouth, and mind.⁴³

Yet Scarborough’s metaphor of the “composite” further suggests the contingency of the processes that turned “real life” into cultural form; that moved plantation material from mine to stamp mill. To be sure, the culture industries did not design the symbolic economy of the ultra-modern old plantation simply to supply comfort to white consumers or to capitulate to the politics of the Lost Cause; they did so to express their own social power.⁴⁴ That this power required people to work it thus rendered it open to transformation and contestation. It would be at this point of work that African American cultural practitioners—critics and showmen, authors and models—would stage their own interventions: work that betrayed the myth of race for the history of race-making, and the aestheticized remembrance of slavery for the political processes of selling slavery.

⁴² See Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

⁴³ Exceptions that account for Harris’s folklore and dialect aesthetic in the history of literary modernism are Brad Brad Evans, *Before Cultures: the Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁴⁴ The point is made by Julie Saville, “Comment on *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s through the Civil War* by Melvin Patrick Ely,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class Histories of the Americas* 6.2 (2009), 21.

The Work of Race in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Without knowing it Gaines shared Broadway with W. E. B. Du Bois, the eminent African American scholar and activist; their paths might even have crossed as Gaines went to study uptown at Columbia while W. E. B. Du Bois went to work downtown near Union Square, at the headquarters of the NAACP. The old plantation panorama would have struck the two historians differently, to say the least. Where Gaines saw a benign survival of a storied cultural tradition Du Bois saw the alibi of a racist social order: a “theory of human culture [that] has worked itself through warp and woof of our daily thought with a thoroughness that few realize,” a “theme continually rung in picture and story, in newspaper heading and moving-picture.” Instead of seeing a memory of slavery, Du Bois saw a stark reconstitution of slavery’s creed: “a Black Man has no rights which a white man is bound to respect.” But while Gaines shied away from developing a “theory,” Du Bois posed the critical question: “[W]hy will this Soul of White Folk,—this modern Prometheus,—hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past?” The question drove Du Bois’s intellectual and political career. Why did Americans continually return to the myth of race, the “theory” of a system long since eradicated? Because, he speculated then, racism had become instituted in everyday life. It had the backing of a nebulous system. “It has its literature, it has its priests, it has its secret propaganda and above all, it pays!”⁴⁵

Du Bois provides a historical theory of racial value missing—if not anathema to—Gaines’s survey of the ultra-modern old plantation. By now historians and critical theorists of race are familiar with Du Bois’s conceptualization of race as a “public and psychological wage.”

⁴⁵ Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” 44, 52. Du Bois’s claim that racism had “worked itself through warp and woof of our daily thought” was a pessimistic inversion of his more hopeful claim made in 1903, that “Actively we [the black folk] have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,” by contributing work, culture, and spirit essential to making the American economy, civilization, and soul; W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 263.

In *Black Reconstruction* (1935), Du Bois explained that poor whites in the South affirmed their allegiance to the planter class by cultivating a feeling of racial superiority in relation to the black sharecropper. As a symbolic payment race served to compensate working whites for real losses in equity and power in the New South political economy.⁴⁶ For Du Bois the cost of this bargain was tragic. The veil of race displaced real social conflict between labor and capital by blinding white rural laborers to common cause with their African American counterparts—and motivated them to act murderously against any threat to their fragile claim on racial superiority. In “The Souls of White Folk” (1920), Du Bois tracked the value of race across the contemporary global political economy, the tensions of which had recently erupted into a world war. Western empires had brought themselves to the brink of destruction in competition not only for colonial resources but for the “dark” colonial labor that would produce them: “Rubber, ivory, and palm-oil...cotton, gold, and copper—they, and hundred other things which dark and sweating bodies hand up to the white world from their pits and slime, pay and pay well.”⁴⁷ Thus the symbolic value of race as a “public and psychological wage” was inseparable from a wider political economy that exploited the racialized labor power of “dark and sweating bodies.” Indeed race can be seen as a mark of difference that distilled performances of identity, figments of ideology, and the operations of large-scale socioeconomic structures in everyday experiences of work and life. “It as at this level” of the everyday, Thomas C. Holt affirms, “that race is reproduced long after its original historical stimulus—the slave trade and slavery—have faded.”⁴⁸

Behind the symbolic commerce of the ultra-modern old plantation, and behind the figurative mines and stamp mills that linked Southern myth to Northern markets, was a cultural

⁴⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (1935; rpt. New York: Free Press, 1992), 700-1.

⁴⁷ Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” 44-45.

⁴⁸ Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *AHR* 100.1 (Feb. 1995), 7; see also Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012).

economy that tied the modern form and value of race to the work of black minds and bodies. To overthrow the racial regime that had come to infuse the daily operations of modern industrial society meant not only identifying and transforming the work of race in on the level of class relations and in sites of colonial and factory labor; it also meant confronting the culture industries that tied the work of simulating the plantation myth to the reproduction of their own social power. If the representation of the old plantation mystified the political economy of global capitalism with a “fable of the past,” the mass cultural economy that produced these mystifications itself put race to work, even as that work seemed to melt into air. Du Bois’s conception of race-making helps to modify slightly Michael Rogin’s evocative formulation: American mass culture begins with the work of race.⁴⁹

The work of race in mass culture shared a similar fate to the work of art as described by Walter Benjamin. Technologies of mass visual reproduction such as lithography, photography, and film did not simply represent social reality on a mass scale but transformed the conditions by which people engaged with their sensory environment and with each other. They awakened “*the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things,*” Benjamin wrote, “*and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.*” Like a work of art, under conditions of technological reproduction the work of race did not so much represent reality as produce it, a particular reality in which the “masses” could get closer to the source of an essential blackness (and thus their whiteness) while drawing away from its ostensive source, the black person. “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction.”⁵⁰ For Benjamin, the

⁴⁹ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants and the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 14.

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version” (1935-36), trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, eds., *The*

representational crises precipitated by the mechanical reproduction of art might precipitate a further emancipation of the human: “for the first time...the human being is placed in a position where he must operate with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura,” its essence, and so harness the machinery of cultural representation for revolutionary purposes.⁵¹

In retrospect we can see that whatever revolutionary potential lay in the mass-produced work of art was sharply curtailed by ideologies of race. Nevertheless Benjamin’s conception helps to clarify the work that race did. In the ultra-modern old plantation, figures of race worked to cinch the system of differences that helped audiences and consumers compass tradition and progress, and distinguish the “genuine” from the authentic. Such symbolic work would often depend on the cultural labor of a black performer whose art of playing the slave was at once treasured and demeaned by audiences—and considered profitable and unsavory by cultural workers. “Nothing seemed more absurd,” wrote black vaudevillian George Walker in 1906, “than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself.”⁵² Yet culture industries could turn this paradoxical spectacle itself into a vehicle for power. For consumers of ultra-modern old plantations, the “ridiculous” work of the black actor would absorb their own abjection. Thus the cartoonish figure of the black slave in the old plantation might be said to

Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 23; italics in the original. For a cultural history that explores this dynamic in the turn-of-the-century United States, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

⁵¹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 31. Of course, Benjamin and Du Bois worked in different milieus and claimed different intellectual and cultural traditions; each likely pursued his work unaware of the other. Yet their worlds were not dissimilar. A leftist Jewish intellectual in Nazi Germany and a leftist African American intellectual in Jim Crow America, Benjamin and Du Bois each confronted the power of a racist state and the mediation of its ideology by cultural industry. It is a striking correspondence that warrants worth further comparison of their thought and critical practice, particularly via their relations to German intellectual history and academic institutions, their turns toward Marxism and involvement in American and German the Communist Parties, and their fascinations with popular and material culture, from genre fiction to fashion.

⁵² George W. Walker, “The Real ‘Coon’ on the American Stage,” *Theatre Magazine* 6 (August 1906), 226.

have anticipated the work that Horkheimer and Adorno would later grant to Donald Duck: to “receive[] [their] beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs.”⁵³

What made the work of race so integral—and so insidious—to the work of the culture industries was by making the American history of “dependency and servitude” vanish into a pastoral farce. But it also marked the point where the problem of freedom in the mass cultural economy might reappear. For by touching the abject depths of the blackface mask, black performers and authors carved out vanguard positions in the field of industrializing cultural production, their art generating both new forms of racial representation but also broader visions of social transformation.⁵⁴ As Du Bois would put it in 1903, the redemptive value of the song of the enslaved might be reclaimed through the work of disentangling it from the “debasements and imitations” of the “Negro ‘minstrel’ songs”—“a mass of music in which the novice may lose himself and never find the real melodies.”⁵⁵

As a cultural practitioner if not as a theorist, Du Bois attempted to transform the cultural economy in which the race, its history, and its future could be represented. In 1910 Du Bois left his professorship at Atlanta University to move to New York. There Du Bois made a significant mark on how African Americans were represented in literature, as images, and on the stage. As editor of the NAACP’s mass-marketed magazine *Crisis*, Du Bois generated both new ways of writing about and looking at African American life and history and new markets in which these images of the race could be sold and consumed—from heroic depictions of black leaders to

⁵³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, ed., and Edmund Jephcott, trans. (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110.

⁵⁴ For the social history and institutional networks cultivated by these actors, see Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn-of-the-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006). For critical recoveries of their agency and readings of their performances, Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky”: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 256-57.

controversial documentary photographs of lynchings. In 1925 he called for black artists to produce “propaganda” on behalf of the race, for “until the art of black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human.”⁵⁶ Propaganda captured both his sense of culture’s potential but also how that potential related to material power—the power to *compel*. But a strict understanding of propaganda does not quiet capture his own complex understanding of culture and his own artistic powers. In addition to his lyrical essays collected in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater* (1920), his novels *Quest for the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928), and his histories *John Brown* (1909) and *The Negro* (1915), among many others, he was active as an investor in Black Swan Records, led the protest of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and took up the work of a theatrical producer. In his pageant, *The Star of Ethiopia*, he directed a cast of hundreds of African American performers in live performances in New York (1913), Washington D.C. (1915), Philadelphia (1916), and the Hollywood Bowl (1925). The pageant recast the memory of slavery from the stasis of the old plantation into a dynamic progression of gifts wrought by black people for world civilization. The play reached its climax with the final gift, a demonstration that “the freedom of black slaves meant freedom for the world.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis* (Oct 1926), in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995), 514. Langston Hughes published “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in *The Nation* (June 23, 1926). Du Bois saw in Hughes’s essay, in the words of his biographer, “a deeply disturbing manifestation of anarchy, rather than the declaration of artistic independence intended by its author.” David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 179.

⁵⁷ Du Bois, “National Emancipation Exhibition,” *Crisis* 7.1 (Nov. 1913), 341. For Du Bois and Black Swan Records, see Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, chap. 7; for the evolution in Du Bois’s economic thinking, see Thomas C. Holt, “The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903-1940,” *American Quarterly* 42.2 (June 1990): 301-23; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994); for Du Bois as editor, see Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Katherine Capshaw Smith, *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), chap 1; David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988): 129-55.

Before the Harlem Renaissance, and before the Jazz Age, selling slavery comprised a vibrant if circumscribed field where African American performers and authors attempted to take charge of the means of cultural production and direct the currents of socioeconomic change toward ideals of racial progress. As we shall see in chapter two, Du Bois couched the cultural gifts of black souls in the “Sorrow Songs,” and deployed them to redeem the nation by elevating African Americans to the center of national life. Yet to do so he would not only inhabit the ultra-modern old plantation in order to redirect the traffic and wealth of its symbolic commerce. He also began to envision a broader transformation of the material conditions of cultural production needed to fulfill his historical vision of black emancipation and of racial progress. The distinction he sought to make between the marketing of black song by a blackface minstrel (or Joel Chandler Harris) and his own commercial publication on behalf of black souls was in many ways a distinction between aestheticizing the memory of slavery—to evoke Benjamin’s beguiling distinction—and politicizing the aesthetic work of race-making.⁵⁸ It was a distinction that, for Du Bois at least, made a difference. As he saw it then, so much would depend on the color of his little black book.

The Matter of Renewal

A generation after the energies of selling slavery dissipated, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer would describe life under the American culture industry as a servitude that felt like freedom. Everything was new but nothing would change. “The machine is rotating on the spot... Nothing is allowed to stay as it was, everything must be endlessly in motion.”⁵⁹ When selling slavery had reached its peak it was Du Bois who had clarified the work of race in binding that

⁵⁸ “*The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life....Communism replies by politicizing art.*” Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 41-42; italics in the original.

⁵⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Culture Industry,” 106.

Modern Prometheus to this spot—reaching for the future while “hung bound” to a “fable of the past.” And it was Gaines, despite himself, who continually drew attention to the material power that forged and reformed this bind in daily life. When Gaines passed by the display window of “a great department store,” he was struck not only by an elaborate diorama of a slave plantation but by the power that made it come to life. As his eyes surveyed the picturesque “fields of white cotton, thronged with happy workers,” and run-down slave cabins alive with gamboling “pickaninnies,” banjo-strumming “negroes,” and a “mammy, busy in the preparation of the meal,” he stumbled over a spectacle of automation:

...the windows feature a mechanical toy, dignified with the alliterative title of Jazz-a-bo Jim [sic]; a negro in conventionally fantastic attire stands on a miniature cabin and automatically dances.⁶⁰

Here the “negro” not only dreamed himself but, to quote an earlier historian of the commodity form, began “dancing of its own free will.”⁶¹ What Gaines assured his reader was a benign “survival” of a plantation tradition in the ultra-modern world provides a capstone for a different story of turn-of-the-century national renewal.

In the processes of selling slavery the sensation of renewal was tied to cultural productions that at once sought to modernize American life while reversing the history of slave emancipation. In the 1920s Jazzbo Jim was manufactured by the Louis Marx Co., which had bought the patent from a bankrupt Ferdinand Strauss, Inc., which only years before marketed the same toy as Tombo, the Alabama Coon Jigger. Tombo was the best-selling mechanical toy of the World War I era, marketed both as a reproduction of a dancing plantation slave and a wonder of modern mechanics. In the final chapter I focus on the production, design, and marketing of Tombo to show how one toy manufacturer repurposed the racial motifs of the old plantation to

⁶⁰ Gaines, *The Southern Plantation*, 11.

⁶¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols., trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 1:164.

displace consumer anxieties about life with machines: the toy worked to welcome children into the mass cultural as consumers by staging the child's encounter with the machine as figure of racial mastery, drawing equally from the myth of the old plantation tradition as from a nightmare of abjection in the face of the machine. It thus conflated a social crisis with an ontological one. The need to distinguish human from machine during an age of intensive incorporation and world war brought Americans to an impasse: were they masters working against the will of another, or themselves slaves to a new power. Yet by resolving this question with race the toy also equated the child's failure to perform the dance with a victory for a symbolic black automaton.

In the chapters that lead to Tombo, however, I show how different cultural formations generated feelings of renewal through the reproduction of the old plantation. In chapter one, I peer behind the scenes of one of the most popular public amusements of the 1890s, the plantation spectacles. Although owned and operated by powerful white businessmen who sought to dissolve viewers' anxieties about industrialization with transport an idyllic old South, these "plant shows" depended on the work of dozens if not hundreds of black singers, dancers, and comedians to play as slaves. Among them was Billy McClain, who as star, author, and stage manager of many of these shows sought to link his countermemories of slavery to visions of incorporating black cultural labor. In chapter two, I follow the work of W. E. B. Du Bois as he conceived and wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* to counter the old plantation myth—particularly as it was popularized by Joel Chandler Harris—with a history of slavery enmeshed with the nation's economic progress; yet he also involved himself deeply in the production of the book itself, from the choice of cover to the methods of advertising, in order to imbue the literary commodity with the aura of a black "soul." By contrast, in the commercial and artistic markets for photography—ranging from Kodak snapshots to Manhattan galleries to the ubiquitous postcard—the white

middle class used anachronistic photos of the “Old South” to sync their mobility across time and space to the nation’s progress through history around the common axis of the timeless “negro.”

Because such symbolic constructions of renewal were replete with contradictions and subject to the contingencies of production, the history of selling slavery does not resolve into a narrative but rather illuminates from several vantages a disjuncture in American historiography. By focusing closely on the production of memories of slavery within these sites of cultural transformation, I account for both the growing cultural hegemony of corporate industrial capitalism and its reproduction of race in the realm of culture—as well as the contingency, and even emancipatory potential immanent, if not realized, in the cultural processes in which race was made.⁶² In different ways Billy McClain and W. E. B. Du Bois would grasp that to “compel” Americans to recognize the African American as a human being meant exploiting the revolutionary energy of mass cultural production, undoing the tactile noose of race that the Modern Prometheus tied for himself out of his own creations. On this level we can begin to see the history of slavery entering the politics and temporality of cultural transformation.

“And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new,” as Marx wrote of another forestalled cultural revolution, “they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, and borrow from them names, battle slogans, and costumes.” The revolutionary potential of the new material conditions can only be realized when one can “produce freely in it,” and so “move[] in it without remembering the old.”⁶³ Slavery would continue to haunt the formation of a modern American culture—not so

⁶² See Lears, *No Place of Grace*, who incidentally overlooks the plantation legend in his sensitive account of American antimodernism; and James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), who likewise does not factor race as a category in his lucid analysis of the political economy of the self in commodity relations.

⁶³ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 1978), 595.

romantically or sentimentally as an immaterial spirit, an unresolved “sin” of an abstract American soul, a tragic paradox aching for resolution. Slavery was a presence conjured in the material production of everyday life, a cultural economy of race recuperated through the manufacture of the old plantation myth.⁶⁴ Although it was white consumers who most enthusiastically created the new through the fables of old plantation, African American cultural workers exceeded their roles as “authentic” relics of the past. For these workers the prospect of producing a new culture freely was tensely related to the remembrance of the “old,” whether the plantation fantasies they were hired to perform or the black cultural traditions they sought to preserve and reproduce. Indeed their efforts to redeem even the most degraded representations of the past and of themselves suggest a contrapuntal twist to Marx’s formula: if the culture industries repeated the tragedy of slavery as a farce, their hired comedians seized what chance they could to alter the conditions of history’s production.⁶⁵

How do you redeem the unredeemable? In the archives of selling slavery the historian is confronted with American popular culture at its most hateful; it cannot be overlooked that the stock of racist caricatures that made up Gaines’s “survivals” were contemporary with the spectacles of lynching and even shared a common logic. The nation’s modernization was tied not simply to the achievement of “whiteness” but to a collective wish for the very extremes of black abjection, whether realized in servitude or in death.⁶⁶ It is certainly not a comfort to observe that because white Americans hewed their modernity to whiteness they shuttered their own minds not

⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (

⁶⁵ Thus my argument builds on an insight that has been pursued most strongly in Thomas C. Holt, *Children of Fire: a History of African Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture and Community in Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Susan Curtis, “Black Creativity and Black Stereotype: Rethinking Twentieth-Century Popular Music in America,” in Brundage, ed., *Beyond Blackface*, 124-146; Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

⁶⁶ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). See also John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

only to what slavery was but also what freedom could be. If our situation in the present day is any indication, ideologies of race seem intrinsic to the operations and our imaginations of what “mass culture” is, for the cultural wealth that adheres to blackness continues to be harvested for the symbolic compensation of white consumers and the real profit of the (now globalized, decentered, fragmented, but nonetheless powerful) culture industry. At stake in the study of race in mass culture is more than diagnosing the cultural psychopathology of white Americans but also accounting for the equity owed to black Americans.

But by examining how this order emerged within the processes of cultural production and in the sensuous character of cultural products, we might glimpse the dreams of renewal lost in the engine of progress. To imagine a Modern Prometheus unbound by the fable of the past was to begin to imagine how the fruits of modernity might be enjoyed on the grounds of universal freedom. By the 1920s Du Bois could still link the abolition of the racist regime to the promise of industrial society: “[e]ducation, political power, and increased knowledge of the technique and meaning of the industrial process are destined to make a more and more equitable distribution of wealth in the near future.”⁶⁷ “In fine,” Du asked, “can we not, black and white, rich and poor, look forward to a world of Service without Servants?”⁶⁸ Whatever the tenability of such visions then or for our time, their presence in the mass cultural production of the memory of slavery reminds us of the historicity of our own present, our fate to remake the world out of the compromised cultural material granted to us, our chance to seize a future without Tombo perhaps by disassembling its motor.

⁶⁷ Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” 43.

⁶⁸ Du Bois, “The Servant of the House,” in *Darkwater*, 120-21.

1.

STAGING SLAVERY

When Nate Salsbury found himself in trouble he looked for refuge in the old plantation. Salsbury was the manager of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which by 1893 had become the largest and most successful entertainment in the nation by far. Indeed he was a celebrity in his own right for being among the first to stage public amusements on an industrial scale. Through extensive touring and integrated control over every part of the production—from performers' contracts to railroad cars—the Wild West Show was able to deliver its spectacle of frontier conquest to millions across the U.S. and Europe, and make Salsbury a rich man. But like other industries, public amusements, too, foundered when the incorporating American economy sunk into a depression. Following a severe drop in ticket receipts in 1894, Salsbury leased off the rights to the Wild West and looked to recoup his losses by mounting another production, one with wide appeal yet cheaper to make.¹

The result was a slave plantation familiar and brand new. Though *Black America* paled in comparison to the Wild West, it captured headlines for the novelty of its “old plantation,” first when it was staged outdoors in Brooklyn's Ambrose Park fairgrounds in 1895 and then as it toured to Madison Square Garden and other major venues in Boston and Washington, D.C., that fall. Of course, minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stage shows had long presented “spectacular” plantations in “mammoth” scales since the 1870s, to say nothing of the dozens of “plant shows” that had become a vogue on the amusement circuit in 1892, and from which Salsbury had, in fact, stolen shamelessly.² But for audiences, *Black America* seemed like nothing

¹ For the “industrial basis” of the Wild West Show, see Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 31.

² See Francis Pendleton Gaines, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and Accuracy of a Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925).

else. The reviewer for the *New York Times* was so impressed he wrote as if he had never seen a plantation on stage before. Not only were there acrobats, cake-walks, and a boxing match. As the thousands in the grandstands surveyed the familiar minstrel antics and “the happy, careless life” of the “fun-loving darcy,” they thrilled at the novel ways in which “the cotton fields, the negro cabins, the songs and dances of slavery days [were] reproduced.” What caught the eye was not only the seeming verisimilitude of the reproduction but also the work of reproduction itself, both performed by the African American actors who sang and danced as they ginned, pressed, and bailed cotton on stage. To describe the spectacle, the reviewer was raised—or reduced—to irreverent onomatopoeia: emitted from the nation’s past of human bondage was “a low whistle that sounds like ‘a-whip, a-whip, a-whip, a-whee.’”³

By examining *Black America* and its “plant show” competitors, this chapter shows how showmen, performers, and audiences created commercial and cultural value out of the memory of the slave plantation at a moment when public amusements were adopting the ethos and often the organizational techniques of the industrial corporation. In these plantation spectacles, the power of industry to reproduce culture for the nation was presented alongside a sanitized reproduction of a cotton plantation. Advertised as “A Gigantic Exhibition of Negro Life and Character,” and employing hundreds of African American musicians, actors, and dancers, Salsbury’s *Black America* overlapped nostalgia for the old plantation and racist caricatures of the enslaved with celebratory visions of industrial progress and corporate power (fig. 1.1). While the sight of the “fun-loving darcy” working in a pre-industrial pastoral would have appealed to feelings of racist nostalgia, Salsbury married this memory to boasts of his own managerial

³ “Wild Negro Chants and Dances: In ‘Black America,’ Brooklyn, May Be Seen the Fun-Loving Darcy of Old Slavery Days,” *New York Times* (May 25, 1895), 9. For the most complete recovery of the performance and staging of Salsbury’s *Black America*, see Roger Allen Hall, “*Black America*: Nate Salsbury’s ‘Afro-American Exhibition,’” *Educational Theatre Journal* 29 (March 1977): 49-60.

proWess. For the Boston show, he arranged for train cars to transport audiences from suburban Lowell, and sold tickets from the New York & New England Railroad's downtown office. When he gave tours of the grounds to reporters, his custom-built "glittering ivory white" train car was the center of attention. It shone all the whiter for the black bodies surrounding it. "We's gwine to hab a train all white, wif red lettahs, an' gold, an' a bullgine wif a gold smokestack," as the *Boston Herald* rendered the voice of one of the show's performers. "[C]lear de track fer de great 'Black America' white express."⁴

Although Salsbury's "white express" would run out of steam before the end of 1895, the staggering costs of staging and performers' wages finally outstripping ticket receipts, its brief, blazing run opens a view onto a deeper contest over the value of the memory of the slave plantation within the culture industries of the urban northeast. Scholars have examined smaller-scale "Old Plantation" concessions in the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta (1896) and the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo (1901) in order to show how boosters of the New South promoted the industrialization of the cotton economy as a restoration of the harmonic racial order of the slave plantation.⁵ Yet the Southern plantation concessions had likely been inspired by *Black America*, which had copied from *The South Before the War*, a hit on the national amusement circuits since 1892, whose white managers had stolen material from African American stage troupes, who themselves worked within the tropes and scripts established by antebellum blackface minstrels, who had claimed to be the original "delineators" of plantation slaves. From 1892 to 1896, the plantation spectacles refracted this dizzying genealogy within an unfolding social drama that swept through the rising corporate industrial economy. Not only

⁴ "'All Ober Norf and Souf': The 'Black America' White Train Will Travel," *Boston Herald* (c. Sept. 1895?), Black America Scrapbook, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (BRTD).

⁵ Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 49-51; Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 146-7.

had the depression caused by over-extended railroad corporations helped sink Salsbury's Wild West Show; it was exposing Americans to the reality of mass unemployment and the prospect of social revolution. Directly preceding *Black America's* debut, the Pullman strike in 1894 and the Brooklyn trolley strike in 1895 brought martial law to city streets and class warfare to the nation's anxious attention; the press circulated images of brutal street fighting—and armed trolley cars plowing through “the mob” (fig. 1.2).⁶ Though the streets had calmed by the summer theatrical season (the private trolley corporation having broken the strike), *Black America's* “old plantation” referenced this social tumult both obliquely and directly, at once a celebration of industrial power and an escape to its pastoral opposite.

Behind the scenes, however, Salsbury and his “plant show” competitors found that their ability to resolve these tensions hinged on a particularly headstrong technology of reproduction: the African American performer. Though presented as “genuine Southern darkies,” many of these actors had been born free in the North and were likely professionally trained—indeed they had to be to meet the demands of live production. None longed to return to an old plantation; many harbored their own dreams for profit and prestige as popular entertainers. Scholars of African American cultural and theatrical history have documented the profound dilemmas facing these African American musicians and actors whose performances were at once valued as authentic representations of African American culture—and diminished as works of hapless slaves.⁷ But

⁶ The significance of the Brooklyn trolley strike as a public conflict between labor and capital is thoroughly narrated in Daryl M. Heller, “The Poor Man's Carriage: Street Railways and Their Publics in Brooklyn and New York, 1850-1896” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2012), chap. 6; it also provided the setting for the violent climax in Theodore Dreiser's naturalist novel about consumer society, *Sister Carrie* (1900). For the Pullman strike as a signal event in the “making of modern America,” see Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Norton, 2011), chap. 10; Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 182-84; Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 289-302; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 222-23.

⁷ David Krasner, “The Real Thing,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Jayna

representation of the “real” and the value of the “authentic” were constructed amid the everyday negotiations over power on the stage and in the amusement marketplace. As African American blackface performer Tom Fletcher and James Weldon Johnson, the doyen of the Harlem Renaissance, would each remember, the plantation spectacles of the 1890s were also among the first to showcase and organize black theatrical talent on such a large scale.⁸ At the same time they popularized the contrapuntal rhythms of ragtime, the harmonized singing of quartet groups, and the dexterous movements of the cakewalk—all popular fads—this cohort of black cultural labor navigated the arrayed powers of white management, corporate organization, and mechanical reproduction to claim a place in the amusement industry. And as they did so, they infused their reenactments of the slave plantation with meanings that blended the old ideals of black emancipation and new dreams of cultural revolution, in which freedom would be expressed in the forms, institutions, and technologies of corporate capitalism.⁹ No more so than Billy McClain, comedian and stage manager, who not only wrote the bulk of the plantation shows but also worked toward a vision of corporate cultural enterprise all his own: the Colored Comedy Carnival Company, “a new aggregation of amusements” by and for the race.¹⁰

Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 139-141; Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn-of-the-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 22; Barbara L. Webb, “Authentic Possibilities: Plantation Performance of the 1890s,” in *Theatre Journal* 56.1 (March 2004), 63-82; Lori Lynne Brooks, “The Negro in the New World: the Cultural Politics of Race, Nation, and Empire, 1885-1911” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2002), 199-222; Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 220; Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 286-291.

⁸ Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (1954; rpt. New York: De Capo Press, 1984); James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (1936; New York: Atheneum, 1968), 93-96. See also documents from the amusement press collected in Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African-American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), hereafter abbreviated *OOS*.

⁹ For this notion of cultural revolution, though largely conceptualized exclusive of African Americans and the context of slavery and emancipation, see James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Zeke Blossom [Billy McClain], “The Negro Actor—A Factor,” *Railroad Porters and Waiters Magazine* 6.10 (June 1902), 2, in box 3, folder 9, Phillip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams, *T-Mss 1991-026, BRTD.

For their largely white audiences, drawn from the working and middle classes of the urban northeast, plantation shows like *Black America* momentarily brought the legacies of slave emancipation and the incorporation of culture into the same frame. Certainly, audiences were attracted to the old plantation as a pastoral escape from the trials of modernity and a restoration of a natural racial order; in the American memory the slave plantation represented “another world to live in,” as historian David W. Blight puts it.¹¹ But as they walked by the show bills plastered on the street or watched the spectacle unfold before their eyes, audiences would have found no easy escape from either cultural modernity or black freedom. As marketing material, press coverage, and photographs from these shows testify, audiences in fact delighted in the modernity of the entertainment and of its African American entertainers. Not only were audiences drawn to the very difference between real and fake that the show promised to both affirm and blur—an operational aesthetic that had been part of the showman’s toolkit since Barnum.¹² In the art of the black actor, as it appeared to the show’s reviewers, audiences could see a liminal figure on the border of real and fake, natural and artificial, slave and free, whose labor on the spectacular plantation represented a return to enslavement and a prospect of human survival amid the amusement machine. Indeed at moments the spectacle seemed to project a mirage of the audience’s emancipation joined to the ideals slave emancipation. Salsbury himself framed his spectacular plantation with the heroes of abolition, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass and John Brown. Of course, Salsbury was no Stowe, and

¹¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 222. See also Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 124-43. While arguing that the plantation show was not a nostalgic memory but an instantiation of the plantation form itself within the corporate economy, Aaron Yeats Carico overlooks the black actors who performed in the shows and the claims they made on its production and reception; “The Free Plantation: Slavery’s Institution in America, 1865-1910” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2012), 128-220.

¹² James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). For Barnum’s operational aesthetic, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: the Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), chap. 3.

the emancipatory visions of the plantation spectacular would prove fleeting. For audiences, however, these shows were transfixing as a spectacle of theater and market, a doubled performance of slave labor and cultural transformation in which slave emancipation was repeated and the industrial future of American culture rehearsed on the same stage.¹³ It was the mass appeal of this dual motion that filmmaker D. W. Griffith would harness in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a spectacle that narrated a new nation into being by at once reversing its history of slave emancipation and announcing a new culture made by machines and administered by technicians.

Twenty years before *Birth of a Nation*, however, the showmen, performers, and audiences of the plantation spectacular imagined different futures for the race and the nation in the heart of the amusement industry. As a memory subject to the reproductive capacities of the amusement industry, the slave plantation was contested for its ownership and value at each step of its manufacture, from its inception to production to performance to reception. And at each step, the African American performer interposed himself into the works, urging against the apparatus of racial nostalgia to test the cultural marketplace as a staging ground for modern freedom.

I. Copies

In December 1893, John Whallen and Henry Martell declared *The South Before the War* “a copy of nothing yet seen in American Amusements.”¹⁴ For nearly a decade they would confidently repeat this pitch in playbills and press notices, drumming up standing-room-only audiences in burlesque houses and amusement halls across the nation. Yet after only a year on the road the boast took on a more precise meaning: they had been accused of theft. James McIntyre and Thomas Heath, a popular blackface duo, claimed that *The South Before the War* was in fact a

¹³ This formulation is inspired by Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁴ Whallen & Martell, “Dixie Gruel for Yank Newell,” *New York Clipper* (Dec. 16, 1893), in *OOS*, 366.

copy of their own *Way Down South*. However well-founded—both acts made liberal use of Charles White’s *Uncle Eph’s Dream*, a plantation sketch published in 1874—the dispute never made it to a court of law. Instead it augured a changing balance of power within the amusement industry. By the end of the decade, while McIntyre and Heath endured as one of the few minstrel acts on the vaudeville stage, Whallen and Martell had translated their profits from *The South Before the War* into stock in the Empire Circuit Company—a “booking corporation” which attempted to monopolize and standardize the traffic in burlesque entertainment across the nation.¹⁵ Whallen and Martell had not only managed to repackage the “old plantation” as a new American amusement; they had also staged a coup over blackface minstrelsy.

Whallen and Martell could be emblems for the public spirit of national reconciliation which took hold of American culture at the turn of the century; they expressed this spirit in the field of public amusement. Martell was born in New York City and raised in show business as a performer and later manager in the “Martell family of bicyclists.” Whallen, born in New Orleans, claimed to have enlisted in the Confederate Army in 1862 (at age 11!), and in peacetime witnessed the rise of the New South as a worker on the Cincinnati Southern Railroad, as a city detective, and finally as a theater owner in Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁶ When the Northerner and the Southerner met in 1890 they not only held complementary experiences as entertainment professionals, on and off the stage, but also sought to heal the wounds of Civil War under the auspices of shared business ties and a common white identity. Indeed they embodied this sentiment of reunion when forming the South Before the War Company, which was designed to show audiences “what plantation life really was before our great internecine struggle.” Still, they

¹⁵ M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years of Theatrical Management* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1912), 326. Known as the “Burlesque Trust,” the Empire Circuit Company would eventually face legal challenges from local theater owners; see, for example, “Burlesque Trust Loses,” *New York Times* (Oct. 27, 1906).

¹⁶ Biographical information about Whallen and Martell from M. B. Leavitt, *Fifty Years of Theatrical Management* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1912), 322-26; *New York Clipper* (March 5 and April 2, 1892), in *OOS*, 360-61.

couldn't help boasting about their own "big" enterprise.¹⁷ In this they also stood for the material conditions of the reunited nation in the shared business ties between the formerly warring sections. Unlike fellow romancers of reconciliation in the literary world, the showmen dealt not in the written word but in the human bodies and stage apparatus of live performance. And unlike New South boosters such as Henry Grady, they did not seek to industrialize real cotton plantations with capital investment. Instead they coveted a share of the growing but disorganized market in theatrical amusements and the ticket receipts of working- and middle-class men and women who were "going out" for fun.¹⁸ Whallen and Martell decided that the best way to do this was to steal from minstrels.

Whallen and Martell thus stepped into a history defined as much by the cultural dynamics of racial masquerade as by the rising spirit of national reconciliation and racial segregation. To represent the plantation on the popular stage meant joining a cultural tradition that reached back to the 1830s, when white performers in the industrializing cities of the northeast donned black facepaint to both ridicule and imitate black plantation slaves. As Eric Lott explains, blackface minstrels consolidated their hold over the representation of blackness by claiming to imitate the "original" songs and dances of the plantation slaves; in so doing, they appealed to their working class audience's ambivalent feelings toward slavery as a comparison and juxtaposition to industrial wage labor. Minstrelsy's monopoly over blackness not only survived but also capitalized on the mounting political crisis over slavery in the 1850s; even actors in abolitionist

¹⁷ Mr. [Harry] Martell, "The South Before the War," handwritten précis (n.d.), in box 1, folder 1, MSS 87, South Before the War Company Papers, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library of Yale University (SBWC).

¹⁸ Here and throughout my account of the business history and cultural meaning of public amusement at the turn of the century relies on David Nasaw, *Going Out: the Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

dramatizations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* donned burnt-cork to play the title role.¹⁹ But blackface was never simply a caricature: it depended on the social relationships of performance in the urban amusement market to reproduce its value as the “real” copy of blackness on the stage; and control over these relationships remained in the hands (and on the faces) of white working-class men.²⁰

After the war, this order was thrown in disarray by the coincident events of slave emancipation and the industrialization of public amusement. Some newly enfranchised African American citizens took the chance to enter show business as minstrels even more “real” than their burnt-cork counterparts. Meanwhile, emboldened white managers looked at growing networks of rail, telegraph, and capital and saw the chance to launch minstrelsy on a “mammoth scale.” By the 1870s, big-time minstrel managers such as Jack Haverly and Charles Callender set to work buying up local African American and white minstrel troupes and local theaters, fashioning minstrel empires after the railroad corporations their newly mass entertainment depended upon.²¹

Yet this industrial regime of blackface production was fraught with internal conflict over the ownership of its “original” plantation property. Haverly and Callender’s minstrel monopolies were vulnerable to the cyclical depressions which plagued the national economy, prompting their

¹⁹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216-20 ; For blackface minstrelsy and working-class formation at this time, see also David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991; rev. ed. New York: Verso, 1999).

²⁰ A distinguishing feature of this order was effectively barring African American street performers from the commercial stage; for their history, see Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). For blackface minstrelsy as a symbol and a social relationship reproduced in everyday cultural practice, on and off the stage, see Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History,” *AHR* 100.1 (Feb. 1995), esp. 14-18; Lott, *Love and Theft*, chap. 2, esp. p. 39. For the “life” of the commodity and the production of value, see Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret,” in Ben Fowles, trans., *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977), 163-177; Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1-63.

²¹ This and much of my brief history of postbellum minstrelsy which follows draws heavily from Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), chap. 5.

owners to modify their entertainment for a broader audience; throughout the 1870s and 1880s, blackface minstrelsy lost ground, fast, to increasingly organized and “respectable” variety and vaudeville acts which were designed to appeal to women as well as men, a rising middle class as well as workers, in hotly competitive entertainment districts in growing downtown city centers.²² Managers refashioned their white minstrels to become more like variety acts and recapture the attention of urban audiences. They also marketed their minstrel ephemera—from joke books to cigar boxes—under their brand names. Other entrepreneurs followed suit by marketing minstrel scripts (“Ethiopian Sketches”), “Prepared Burnt Cork” kits (25 cents per box or \$2.25 for a dozen), and blackface wigs and costumes (“Uncle Tom” was common)—all mass produced and distributed nationwide by mailorder catalogues.²³ The intensive mass-production and marketing of blackface had the effect of abstracting the racial sign from its referent not only in the white blackface performer but also in the historical slave plantation; it was a copy ever more distant from the original. Looking back on this period two decades later, Columbia University professor and drama critic Brander Matthews saw blackface minstrelsy descend into decadence: instead of “devoting themselves to a loving delineation of the colored people... they turned aside to devote themselves to the spectacular elaboration of their original entertainment.”²⁴

²² John Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business in America, 1840-1940* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), chap. 3; Robert M. Lewis, “Introduction: from Celebration to Show Business,” in Lewis, ed., *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1-21; Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

²³ Philipp Ostermayer, Catalogue (Jersey City, n.d. [c. 1905?]), 18; Afro-Americana (box 3, fl. 3), and C. H. W. Bates & Co. Mail Order Catalogue (Boston, n.d.), in Novelties (box 1, fl. 3), Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁴ Brander Matthews, “The Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy” (1912), in *A Book about the Theater* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), 230. Matthews’ friend Mark Twain made a similar complaint in 1906: see Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville*, 90. For other eulogies to minstrelsy, see Isaac J. Greenwood, *The Circus: Its Origin and Growth prior to 1835, with a Sketch of Negro Minstrelsy* (1898; 2nd ed. New York: William Abbatt, 1909), 127; Henry Austin Clapp, *Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), 17-18.

As blackface became increasingly self-referential the ownership and meaning of the original slave plantation became newly up for grabs. On the one hand, minstrel magnates such as Haverly and Callender squeezed value from their black minstrel troupes by affirming their racial tie to the old plantation. In the post-Reconstruction amusement circuit, African American minstrel shows and Tom shows became nearly interchangeable as representations of the old plantation. In 1883, Callender's Georgia Minstrels toured a "Colossal Consolidated Spectacular Colored Minstrel Festival" and featured acts from the Barnum Circus and a "realistic" view of "de Ole Plantation in its entirety"; in 1882, C. H. Smith's Boston Double Mammoth Uncle Tom's Cabin Company boasted real bloodhounds, two Topsies and two Marks, along with a "Great Plantation Festival."²⁵ On the other hand, African American performers and entrepreneurs infused the memory of the old plantation with new meaning. While performing plantation material, though relegated to "small time" western routes and venues where there was little competition from large Tom shows or blackface competitors, African American minstrels found a measure of freedom to project "refined" images of race to white and black audiences in the south and west. Moreover, they were proving grounds for a generation of African American show people and entrepreneurs such as Sam Lucas, Lew Johnson, and Charles Hicks, all of whom tried to upend the symbolic and material production of blackness. Lew Johnson found success as manager, actor's agent, and theater owner in Chicago. Sam Lucas gained celebrity and respectability under white and black management as a comedian and as the first African American to play Uncle Tom. But Charles Hicks seems to have most boldly braved this topsy-turvy cultural economy. Having sold the Georgia Minstrels to white showman Charles Callender

²⁵ Program for Callender's Georgia Minstrels in *Footlight* (Virginia City, Nevada, Aug. 6, 1883), in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 49-50; program for Smith's Boston Double Mammoth Uncle Tom's Cabin Show (Lewiston, Pa., Sept. 26, 1882), in *Uncle Tom's Cabin Playbills & Programs*, Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

in 1872, Hicks remained as manager while harboring ambitions to return to the helm. In 1882, he attempted to wrest back control of the troupe, prompting Callender to collude with showmen Gustave and Charles Frohmann to start a new “mammoth” minstrel troupe which hired away all of Hick’s company. A resilient Hicks again broke away to form his own troupe. He advertised in *The New York Clipper* after a successful Southern tour in 1886 that his cast was “the best of great men” and declared “that the coon’s days are over!” “[T]he advent of Brains,” Hicks continued, “has carried our banner to victory.”²⁶

Hicks’s bold pronouncement belied the lasting legacy of the blackface minstrel show on the cultural representation of race: even African American performers marketed themselves by their ties to the “old plantation,” which had become a sign of racial authenticity itself. The plantation was such a valuable cultural property that a new cohort of entrepreneurs learned to exploit it without any body or any ties to the theater at all. Early phonograph companies attempted to pay for their licenses on Edison’s machines with the “old-fashioned” appeal of black slaves. In 1891, the Ohio Phonography Company sold cylinders of “an-old-time-before-the-war banjo song by a plantation darkey,” and a year later the Louisiana Phonograph Company banked on a whole line of “old plantation songs.”²⁷ These recordings were still curiosities; they posed no real threat to the live stage. But their makers had identified the secret of the “old plantation” which future amusement entrepreneurs would also exploit: whether the cylinder was

²⁶ Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 41-42, 46-47, and *passim*; *New York Clipper* (Jan. 6, 1886), in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 53. By August, Hicks combined with A. D. Sawyer’s Georgia Minstrels to form Hicks and Sawyer’s Consolidated Colored Minstrels.

²⁷ National Phonographic Association, *Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention* (New York, 1891), 62-3, and “The Louisiana Phonograph Company, Limited,” in *Phonogram* 2 (January 1892), 10, both quoted in Nasaw, *Going Out*, 125.

an actual recording of a “plantation darkey” mattered less than the aura that the very sign of the “old plantation” provided to the reproduction.²⁸

When Whallen and Martell entered the amusement marketplace in 1892, the “old plantation” was a hot commodity whose ownership was deeply contested and up for grabs. Yet between the Double Mammoth Tom Show and African Americans with Brains, it was hardly an open field for the spirit of sectional reconciliation, let alone for Lost Cause nostalgia. Despite their resort to minstrel caricature, the scores of touring Tom shows often overtly advertised the legacy of abolition and continued to stand for the ideals of black emancipation in the public mind.²⁹ The field was otherwise crowded with burnt-cork entertainment diluted of historical reference, or actual black performers who performed stories of freedom and racial equality. To realize their reconciliationist memory of the old plantation on the stage, Whallen and Martell faced not only a field riven with the politics of race and nation, but also a racial politics of cultural labor, in which African American performers continued to hold limited but significant sway.

Although they invented no new technology of reproduction, in many ways Whallen and Martell acted like these early phonograph companies by expropriating the “old plantation” as a sign both valuable and highly vulnerable to imitation. Their theft of minstrel material could not have been more shameless or complete. They based their opening sketch on *Uncle Eph’s Dream* (just as McIntyre and Heath accused), available by mailorder from New York City’s DeWitt publishers for fifteen cents a copy. They also appropriated human material. In addition to hiring

²⁸ See David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), chap. 3; see also Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version” (1935-36), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-55.

²⁹ David S. Reynolds, *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: Norton, 2011), chap. 5; Anne E. Marshall, “The 1906 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* Law and the Politics of Race and Memory in Early-Twentieth Century Kentucky,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 1.3 (Sept. 2011), 368-393.

Charles Howard, a white blackface star of the minstrel stage, to play the title role in the debut tour, they recruited heavily from African American minstrel troupes, particularly the all-black Hyers Sisters Company. Like other professional African American actors and musicians in the 1880s, the Hyers Sisters hewed more closely to the plantation origin as they fell in and out of control by white showmen. But they retained enough autonomy by 1890 to stage *Out of Bondage*: a showcase for “the greatest and most refined company of colored comedians and singers.” The Hyers Sisters also based their show on *Uncle Eph’s Dream*.³⁰ Indeed it may have been one of the Hyers’s troupe that brought the show to Whallen and Martell. According to McClain’s friend and colleague Tom Fletcher, Billy McClain, performer with the Hyers’ Sisters, who “sold them the idea of putting on the show *South Before the War*.”³¹ Even Whallen and Martell’s theft was unoriginal.

We do not know the exact constellation of purchase, borrowing, and outright theft that led to *The South Before the War*. Yet their surviving business records and marketing materials betray a significant shift in how Whallen and Martell were assembling their “old plantation” for the amusement marketplace. It was not enough for Whallen and Martell to promise a realistic memory of an original plantation; they had to promise to overturn the accreted history of blackface performance on the live stage. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued, for artists to inject novelty into a cultural economy they had not only to make something “new” in relation to

³⁰ Program for Hyers Sisters’ *Out of Bondage* (Los Angeles, c. 1890), in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 72. Born in slavery, and educated by Boston philanthropists, the Hyers Sisters began their career in 1867 as a “refined” soprano and tenor duo who performed selections of Italian Opera, and as late as 1879 were performing plays such as Pauline Hopkins’s *Slaves Escape; or, the Underground Railroad* which stressed the epic of emancipation and the progress of the race. For Hopkins’ early ties to the Hyers Sisters, see Hazel V. Carby, “Introduction” to *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxx; for biographical information about Emma Hyers, see “Death of a Famous Comedian [Sam Lucas],” *Dramatic Mirror* (Jan 22, 1916), in Sam Lucas clipping file, BRTD.

³¹ Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, 29; Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 85, 92. That McClain may have brought the idea of the show from the Hyers to Whallen and Martell seems likely but is without definitive evidence. Barbara Webb also argues that Billy McClain was the likely link between *Out of Bondage* and *The South Before the War*, though she overlooks *Uncle Eph’s Dream* as its common denominator; Webb, “Authentic Possibilities,” 77.

what came before but also establish new terms by which the “new” would be judged; they had to displace their competitors as “old.”³² As the Louisville showmen copied plantation material directly from white and black minstrel troupes, however, they made their imitation seem like an improvement by making their product appear even closer to its origin in the old plantation. Not only did they pitch *The South Before the War* as a novelty for being one of the rare interracial shows on the amusement circuit, combining white minstrels and black performers on the same stage. They reconstituted their African American performers not as actors with Brains but as a natural technology of cultural reproduction.

In handbills and show programs, and above all in a handwritten précis distributed to theater managers and press agents, Whallen and Martell disguised their theft as a renewal. In a single breath, Martell framed *The South Before the War* as both a return to the “good old Antebellum days” and an advance on blackface minstrelsy. “[W]ith the decades now buried forever in the dim past has disappeared the old time plantation darky,” Martell wrote. “[T]hat interesting ebony individual has gone from actual life and lives now only in his counterfeit presentation upon the ever productive stage.”³³ While emancipation and the passage of time had made real slaves a thing of the past, the source of corruption was the human technology of blackface itself: “burnt-cork and velvet brushed inconsistent Ethiopian imitators.”³⁴ By promising a remedy for minstrelsy, the showmen put themselves in a funny position as employers of minstrels. But they met this doubt by insisting on their performers’ proximity to the

³² “That is why,” Pierre Bourdieu writes, “in an artistic field which has reached an advanced stage of this history, there is no place for *naïfs*; more precisely, the history is immanent to the functioning of the field, and to meet the objective demands it implies, as a producer but also as a consumer, one has to possess the whole history of the field”; Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” trans. Richard Nice (1983), in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randall Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29-73, quotation on 60-61; see also Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief,” trans. Nice, in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Johnson, 104-111.

³³ Martell, “The South Before the War,” 1.

³⁴ Martell, “The South Before the War,” 2.

“origin” of the slave plantation. Responding to McIntyre and Heath’s claim that they were a pale imitation of a minstrel troupe, Whallen and Martell loudly defended Charley Howard as “THE OLDEST AND BEST NEGRO DELINEATOR IN THIS COUNTRY.” In this logic, the Virginian born in 1826 was a more authentic imitator than McIntyre and Heath, who were born in the north in the 1850s.³⁵ It was even easier to transmogrify their black talent. Drawing on their established value as more authentic representations of blackness, and without a trace of irony, Whallen and Martell recast the black actor with Brains into a “genuine Southern darky” who was, at the same time, an antidote to the blackface “counterfeit.” Along with the cotton plants “jes from de Souf,” the black body was the very “pleasant media of song, dance, music and movement” which would transport audiences “in an inimitable manner back to the good old days of the past and The South Before the War.”³⁶

Both “genuine” bodies and “pleasant media,” in Whallen and Martell’s hands the black actor was transformed from a marketplace rival to an ambiguous figure: a black body free from the artifice of the “ever productive stage,” and a human technology which could close the gap between the present and the past. The duality of the black actor came into focus when the showmen dug in against *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—a rival political memory and a rival commercial entertainment. As one program boasted, theirs was the “the Greatest Production of the Century, not excepting Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”³⁷ *The South Before the War* used their position as an improved copy of blackness to establish themselves an alternative to “mammoth” Tom shows which used the same plantation “specialties” but kept alive anti-slavery sentiments of abolitionism. Linking the “counterfeit presentation” of blackface to opinions “colored” by abolitionist literature, Whallen and Martell made the Tom show ripe for an attack not with

³⁵ Whallen and Martell, “Dixie Gruell for Yank Newell.”

³⁶ Martell, “The South Before the War,” 1, 2, 3.

³⁷ Program for *The South Before the War* (5 February 1894), inside cover, SBTW clippings, BRTD.

politics but with aesthetics, the “pleasant media” of the black actor both natural and “photographic”:

[the show] delights the audience with its truthful portrayal of nature, showing with photographic exactness the people as they were in fact, as well as by the noticeable absence of the whipping overseer and the tyrannical rather than the paternal master.³⁸

If *The South Before the War* meant to erase the figure of the violent overseer and tyrannical master—which even the commercialized Tom shows continued to display—it did so as a kind of camera, a machine which could reproduce a “truthful portrayal of nature.” At the very point they attempted to make their copy distinct from the Tom show, they made visible the artifice of the stage which their plantation was designed to remedy: the “noticeable absence” of the overseer’s whip and the master’s tyranny depended on a selective “exactness” which could only be likened to a mechanical copy.

This formulation of the black body helped *The South Before the War* launch themselves as a novel font for authenticity in the amusement market, while also energizing new competition. In “main street” amusement houses across the country, the show soon rivaled the Tom show as a memory and as an enterprise. Chastised for his regular sold-out bookings of various Tom shows throughout the year, one Kentucky theater owner reminded his black and white ticket buyers of the regular appearance of *The South Before the War*: “an idyllic version of the Old South perfectly suited to any second- or third-generation child of the Confederacy.”³⁹ Beyond the South, critics fawned over *The South Before the War* for the very contradiction it compassed: a recovery of something lost yet a production of something new. “Never was such a production ever produced.”⁴⁰ They even dignified it with a slangy name: “plant show.” Soon the upstarts

³⁸ Martell, “The South Before the War,” 3.

³⁹ *Lexington Leader* (Dec. 4, 1898), 7, quoted in Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 45n30.

⁴⁰ So, at least, the showmen quoted the *Boston Transcript* in program for *The South Before the War* (Feb. 5, 1894), 7, clippings file, BRTD.

faced their own crop of imitators, many of them managers of minstrel troupes, who threw together shows called *Slavery Days* and *Darkest America*.⁴¹ But the commotion attracted the notice of even bigger fish. Writing three years after Whallen and Martell debuted their show, a newspaper reviewer repeated their pitch exactly to describe Nate Salsbury's *Black America*. While "[t]he North went wild over the production of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" he wrote, "it was produced by counterfeit representatives of the characters portrayed"—counterfeits he now knew were no better than the "negro delineators of modern minstrelsy" and the "blacks of the North." He knew this because *Black America* "produces the genuine article."⁴²

Salsbury never acknowledged his debt to Whallen and Martell. But it was those showmen who first succeeded in seizing ownership over the symbolic values of the plantation from the blackface stage to create a self-consciously modern spectacle. More than making black minstrel troupes and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* complicit with the artifice of the "ever productive stage," Whallen and Martell injected into the amusement marketplace a new value: a "genuine Southern darky" who was both a natural body and a human photograph, the past itself and a stand-in for the past, a living remainder and a modern supplement. It was a stunning reinvention of the old burnt-cork mask, but reinvented for an age when slaves had disappeared and been replaced by ostensibly free citizens. But instead of fixing the old plantation in memory and in the market, Whallen and Martell's formula itself became subject to imitation. As late as 1898, Martell attempted to protect his product from "counterfeits" in contracts with individual theaters, restricting the time they could hire "any company carrying colored people" and "any colorable

⁴¹ Appropriating *Uncle Eph's Dream*, showman Abe Spitz launched *Slavery Days*; shamelessly, Whallen and Martell threatened legal action, prompting Spitz to rename the sketch *Uncle Rufe's Dream*. Minstrel man Al G. Field hopped on the trend, retooling his Real Negro Minstrels Company into a plant show called *Darkest America*. Although the press continued to refer to his show as Al G. Field's Real Negro Minstrels as late as 1895, it would become known solely as *Darkest America* after being leased to new management in 1897. See *OOS*, 331-35, 360, 365.

⁴² "Grand Opera House: 'Black America,'" n.p. (Philadelphia?), n.d. (c. 1895), in *Black America Scrapbook*, BRTD.

imitation” which appeared to “steal” from *The South Before the War*.⁴³ Because they rested their memory not solely on an image but on humans, they quickly found their version of slavery challenged by the very Brains they had tried to lobotomize.

II. Revisions

Both an object and broker of cultural theft, Billy McClain made sure to secure the copyright to his own plantation spectacle by shouting it on the title page: “By Billy McClain!”⁴⁴ A demonstration of “negro evolution” and the “Kaledoscopic [sic] event of the year,” *Before and After the War* (1894) was certainly the show McClain dreamed of when he met Whallen and Martell. But even though it enjoyed few performances, his unlikely and critical contribution to the theatrical tradition of the old plantation is perhaps reason enough to correct the scholarly oversight of the man and his work. Its writing makes up a vital part of the story about how African Americans attempted to exert control over the apparatus of the amusement industry and instill it with the ideals of racial progress. Drawn from a popular “plantation sketch” dating to the 1860s, *Before and After the War* was likely the common template for *The South Before the War* and *Black America*. While the three spanned the major types of Civil War memory that then circulated in the national culture—black emancipationist, national reconciliationist, white supremacist⁴⁵—they took shape in the close and tense process of script revision among the four showmen. Circling around the scenes of loss and violence inherited from earlier “old plantation” sketches, McClain and his employers recast the memory of the slave plantation to contest the visibility of African American freedom on the stage and in history.

⁴³ “Sharing Contract” between Harry Martell and Jas. P. Berry, Manager of Atheneum Theatre, Santa Rosa, California (15 December 1898), in box 1, folder 1, SBWC.

⁴⁴ Billy McClain, “Before and After the War” (1894), unpublished ms., title page; microfilm and hardcopy in BRTD. As the page numbering in this manuscript is irregular, references reflect their frame in the microfilm reel.

⁴⁵ For the typology of Civil War memory at the turn of the twentieth century, see Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2.

Before their product could be brought to life on the stage, the plantation showmen sought as much as possible to shape the performance through the use of written scripts. More than reflections of the author's fantasies or intentions, theatrical scripts were instruments of power wielded by authors over performers and audiences. Of course, scripts were subject to the contingencies of live performance; they never completely overcame the will of actors or the demands of crowds. But in the latter half of the nineteenth century, scripts—and the social role of the author they stood for—became elevated over the improvisational gestures of performers and outbursts from the balconies. This reflected an emerging cultural hierarchy that eventually set the scripted drama over the ribald sensations of earlier popular theatricals, transforming theaters from spaces of vocal sociability to silent attention. In the 1890s, the amusement houses that showed plantation spectacles disciplined audience behavior and promoted themselves as spaces for legitimate, respectable culture. Because plantation showmen took their material from the hurly-burly world of the antebellum minstrel show, which prized performers' quick wit and interaction with a restless working-class and largely male audience, they had to trim the excesses and unpredictability of performance for a broader audience of middle-class families. (One *South Before the War* program encouraged you to “BRING THE CHILDREN.”) But while these scripts had a precise purpose to regulate the representation of race on stage, they also helped to consolidate managerial power over African American cultural labor. For the plantation showmen, this meant transforming the sentiments of race that shaped affective bonds between the white audience and the figure of the slave; it also meant ordering the movement and utterances of African American performers.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Program for *The South Before the War* (Feb. 5, 1894), 9; Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 184; Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 40-42. David Savran follows this dynamic as it evolves into a new cultural order by the 1920s, when the “mastery” of the written script (and thus the author) set scripted art dramas over improvisational and jazz-inflected “low” musical comedy, invariably associated with African American culture and performers. See David

In addition to the burnt-cork mask, the first minstrels played on their white, working-class audiences' love and hatred for African Americans with stories that balanced comedy and melodrama. The infamous gibes of "Jim Crow" and "Zip Coon" trivialized the oppression of black slaves and lampooned African American pretenses to civility and citizenship. But Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" (1851) was not only one of the few "hits" published by a fledgling sheetmusic industry to reach a national audience; it also established in the working-class mind the figure of the sympathetic slave, somehow roaming freely in the world but "still longing for the old plantation / and the old folks at home." Such sentiment romanticized slavery yet, performed by the black-faced white men of Christy's Minstrels, also invited its white working-class listeners to join in the slave's nostalgia for old "homes" lost to industry, urbanization, European immigration, and westward emigration. Spanning their public's ambivalence toward slavery during the mounting sectional crisis of the 1850s, the popularity of "Old Folks at Home" prompted hundreds of similar songs following the same formula. The figure of the sympathetic slave resonated especially for Harriet Beecher Stowe, who sharpened the audience's empathy into an argument for abolition in her best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Of course, this romantic racialism was never far from and often twinned with more plainly racist forms of aggression: the homesick slave could only return to the old plantation at the cost of his own life; and even Stowe juxtaposed Uncle Tom's martyrdom with the comedy of Topsy and Sambo.⁴⁷

During the waning years of Reconstruction, and while the audience for minstrelsy expanded beyond the Northeast working class, writers of "plantation sketches" responded by

Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). Savran draws his language of mastery and servitude from the mid-twentieth-century French dramatist Antonin Artaud by way of Jacques Derrida, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in Alan Bass, trans., *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 197X), chap. 8.

⁴⁷ Stephen Foster (erroneously credited to E. P. Christy), "Old Folks at Home: Ethiopian Melody" (New York: Firth, Pond & Co, 1851); Lott, *Love and Theft*, 187-201.

making the comedy and melodrama more pronounced and politically charged.⁴⁸ The process was exemplified by the strange career of Charles White's *Uncle Eph's Dream* (1874)—the script that would become the foundation for the plantation spectaculars of the 1890s. Among the plantation sketches published by De Witt and later Happy Hours Publishing Co, *Uncle Eph* lifted the formula of the antebellum “Uncle” songs and minstrel routines.⁴⁹ But if Foster's template was powerful because the old slave never reaches the plantation, amplifying the nostalgia for the home remembered but forever out of reach, White gave this absence specific shape in the context of the unfolding history of abolition and Reconstruction. “When I left here five years ago ebery ting looked prosperous,” Eph laments, “but now, look at it, ebery ting is gwan to ruin.”⁵⁰ The plantation exists only in his “dream,” staged with a cheery cotton-picking scene and Foster melody emanating off-stage—suddenly pierced by the entrance of Eph's son. The overarching melodrama of Eph's nostalgia framed the farce of his family reunion: Eph has to demonstrate his identity to his son and overcome his disbelief that all of his wife's children “belong” to him. While the happy reunion played to the pathos felt for black families ruptured by slavery, the farcical episodes of misidentification made racist “fun” out of the sanctity of black marriage.

Both black and white minstrel troupes capitalized on the dramatic possibilities of *Uncle Eph* for audiences fragmented by region and race.⁵¹ While their working scripts have not survived, their plotting of plantation nostalgia can be gleaned from their advertised programs.

⁴⁸ Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 128-31; Toll, *Blacking Up*, 244-50.

⁴⁹ For background on the publishers of Ethiopian Dramas, I relied on Gary Engle, “An Introduction to the Atkinson Collection of Ethiopian Drama” (unpublished ms., Feb. 26, 1971), in Atkinson Collection of Ethiopian Drama, Special Collections, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

⁵⁰ Charles White, *Uncle Eph's Dream: An Original Negro Sketch in Two Scenes and Two Tableaux* (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1874) 3, no. 303 in Atkinson Collection.

⁵¹ Indeed, J. J. McDermont's plantation song “Uncle Eph's Lament” seemed to capitalize on the success of the sketch (they shared a publisher), though it stripped of references to Reconstruction and amplified the melodrama: the plantation is forever gone, the slave's only reprieve in “heaven.” See J. J. McDermont, “Uncle Eph's Lament,” in *Minstrel Gags and End Men's Hand Book: Being a Collection of Ethiopian Dialogues, Plantation Scenes, Eccentric Doings, Humorous Lectures, Laughable Interludes, End Men's Jokes, Burlesque Speeches, Witticisms, Conundrums, Yarns, Plantation Songs and Dances* (New York: Happy Hours Co., 1875), 33-34, in Songster Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

For the white minstrels, the return to slavery was an easy punchline; for the African American performers, it was a yardstick to juxtapose their own refinement and legitimate their own progressive representation of the race. White minstrels McIntyre and Heath performed *Uncle Eph's Dream* with their Grand Spectacular Minstrels, and used it as an anchor for their conventional minstrel program. Retitled as *Way Down South*, *Uncle Eph* was framed as a “realistic comedy sketch” and concluded the show after the “dazzling first part sensational specialties,” essentially capping off the evening’s entertainment by returning Eph to his old home and undoing abolition. They found especial favor in the South.⁵² The Hyers Sisters countered by renaming *Uncle Eph's Dream* to *Out of Bondage*, joining their picture of “the Darky as he existed in Ante Bellum Days” to the narrative of post-emancipation progress and the performance of authentic black culture, insisting on portraying “humorous characteristics without burlesque” while showcasing “old time jubilee music” alongside “musical novelties.” Performed in a still distant Los Angeles, *Out of Bondage* was both a stunning survival of black emancipationist memory and a marginal entertainment.⁵³

Just as Whallen and Martell reoriented the field of plantation production, so did they inherit a script of plantation nostalgia at odds with their own vision of “happy” slavery days—perhaps the one brought to them by McClain directly from the Hyers Sisters. But instead of starting from scratch, they parodied the old material. Tinkering with the plot over the course of the show’s ten-year run, Whallen and Martell telescoped the duration of Eph’s exile to absurd lengths, from 5 years to 20 or 60. When Eph returns home, he finds not ruin but the old plantation happily unchanged, his family “cotton picking and singing” just as they were in his

⁵²Program for *Way Down South* in *Sporting Life* (Philadelphia, Pa., Aug. 12, 1885), 8 (available online at the LA84 Foundation digital archive: http://www.la84foundation.org/5va/SportingLife_firmst.htm).

⁵³ Program for Hyers Sisters’ *Out of Bondage* (Los Angeles, c. 1890), in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 72.

nostalgic dreams.⁵⁴ More significantly, the focus of the drama shifts to the reunion of the plantation “family,” black and white. Whallen and Martell added to the cast a white master named George Harris, an obvious gibe against the heroic black fugitive in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Harris threatens to banish Eph permanently. Relenting to sentimental appeals by his wife or daughter, Harris forgives Uncle Eph—on the condition that Eph sings to him like in “those old times,” or, in another version, that Eph and his children “do something to amuse us.” (In one draft, Eph turns the question around and requests Miss Harris sing to him “those good old songs that cheered my heart.”)⁵⁵ In many respects this resonated with typical renderings of the plantation as a haven of paternalism and harmonious race relations. But it lampooned the note of melancholic loss that had normally accompanied plantation nostalgia. While making Eph’s dream come true, and sating audience desires to return to a time before abolition, it made fun of the formal conventions which had produced interracial sympathy—however ambivalent and perishable—between the audience and the enslaved while affirming white managerial power over the black actor.

More than uncoupling whatever bonds of interracial feeling that had survived within the form of plantation nostalgia, Whallen and Martell’s use of parody asserted their power over the live performance.⁵⁶ Where a more conventional minstrel troupe would have ended with the plantation sketch, Whallen and Martell opened with *Uncle Eph* to stage the death of blackface. As Uncle Eph dies, so did the old white minstrel playing him conclude his role—“Fall to stage. Chorus &c.”—in effect giving the stage over to the “genuine Southern darkies” played by

⁵⁴ *The South Before the War*, Act I, p. 4, in box 1, folder 3, SBWC.

⁵⁵ Quotations from complete script for *The South Before the War*, 18, in box 1, folder 2; and holograph script for Act I, p. 7, 10, in box 1, folder 3, SBWC; see also typescript variations of Act 1 in same folder.

⁵⁶ For parody as a gesture of power within a field of cultural production, see Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” 31.

African American performers: Exeunt minstrelsy.⁵⁷ But while a black minstrel troupe would have begun with *Uncle Eph* to frame the story “out of bondage,” Whallen and Martell did so to imagine a time without abolition. They used the return to the plantation to open an expanse of “genuine Southern fun-making,” in effect three hours of variety entertainment in Southern settings: a steamboat race, a “camp-meeting” with a Frog Man, and a cake-walk, interspersed with Foster melodies and dance numbers. After removing minstrelsy from the stage, they proceeded to make fun of the black actor.

No role captured the social logic of the parody better than its most superfluous addition. Zeke Blossom or Clawson, a vague relation to Eph, survived the *Dream* to pop up and tie together the otherwise unrelated program as the butt of jokes—caught in the act of pick-pocketing Eph, tossed around by the Frog Man.⁵⁸ The sentimental slave died in the form of a whiteman in blackface; his comic doppelganger was resurrected by a “genuine” black body. Built out of the “Zip Coon” prototype, Zeke was deployed not only to satirize the black freedman but also to contain the threat of the black actor over the white manager. Through Zeke, Whallen and Martell could guide audiences back to the plantation without awakening the specter of martyrdom or the actuality of black freedom. If Whallen and Martell were promoting their show as the product of “natural” black bodies, Zeke was their most “genuine article.” Adding insult to injury, they gave the role to the man who brought them the script.

But McClain had other ideas. Born in Indianapolis in 1866, where he had worked as a page in the Indiana Senate before joining the minstrel circuit as an acrobat and comedian, McClain followed an idiosyncratic career in which he attempted to marry the politics of racial

⁵⁷ *The South Before the War*, Act I, stage script for Old Eph, p. 17, in box 1, folder 3, SBWC.

⁵⁸ “The South Before the War” (n.d.), Act 1, typescript, p. 7, in box 1, folder 3, SBWC; “The South Before the War,” Act II, handwritten ms., pp. 8-9, in box 1, folder 4, SBWC; “The South Before the War” (n.d.), Act II, p. 6, in box 1, folder 4, SBWC.

progress with the commercial opportunities and cultural power in the field of public amusements. Weighing desires for autonomous racial expression against the contingencies of a largely white-run industry like many other black entertainers of his era, he sacrificed racial authenticity for conventional and saleable racist caricature. Yet working under and alongside African American managers such as the Hyers Sisters and Lew Johnson, as well as with Callender's Georgia Minstrels, McClain cultivated a measure of power behind the scenes—power that he would express as a stage manager and talent broker but most subtly as a writer. Revising the script of plantation nostalgia over and over again, McClain was the human motor (or would claim to be) for nearly all of the plantation spectacles from *The South Before the War* to Al Field's *Darkest America* to Nate Salsbury's *Black America*.⁵⁹ Butting against longstanding conventions of the sentimental slave and the outsized power of white managers, McClain nevertheless attempted to revise the same material into a narrative of black freedom in his own plantation script, *Before and After the War*.

He did it with irony. After McClain left the South Before the War Company, Whallen and Martell apparently wavered what to with Zeke. In some scripts they omitted the character but in most changed the name to Zeke Clawson.⁶⁰ Yet Zeke gained a life of its own: McClain not only stole the show with his performance, he stole the character from the show.

⁵⁹ Biographical detail about McClain here and throughout is drawn from Billy McClain, Letter from Paris, *Indianapolis Freeman* (April 2, 1910); Bill Reed, "The Color Line: Billy McClain," in *Hot from Harlem: Twelve African American Entertainers, 1890-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2010), 42-51; Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 397-401.

⁶⁰ As listed in the scripts, following McClain's departure Zeke Blossom/Clawson would be played by William Carter and George R. Moors. George Moors probably refers to George Moore, a member of the Eclipse Quartet who had toured with the South Before the War Company. Carter is more difficult to pin down based on available records of the theatrical labor market. He may have been related to Katie Carter, famous black dancer and singer, who played "May Dewling" on the same bill. William "Billy" Carter was a white blackface performer famous for his mastery of the banjo; though he remained active in the 1890s, in his 60s, there is no record of him performing with Whallen and Martell. On the other hand, William Carter, a black Canadian jubilee singer, managed a troupe on the American amusement circuit at around the same time. Though I think either actor would have helped realize Whallen and Martell's logic of blackface parody—the old white minstrel or the refined black singer containing the energy of the disruptive black clown—neither seem likely to have filled Zeke's comic role. Both were known for musicianship

According to the cast list included with the surviving draft of the script, McClain intended to dramatize the whole sweep of African American history from its African origins to the present day, “from a savage to congress.” In this conception, the play would be bookended by the stories of “The Great African King” Zion Miambo and Reconstruction-era lawyer Macon B. Allen (both played by McClain), and would showcase a veritable pantheon of African American heroes. But even at this conceptual stage McClain wrote his drama of African American progress by revising the tropes of the minstrel stage and of *Uncle Eph* in particular. Along with “Lawyers, doctors, preachers, policeman [sic], musicians,” there would be “swamp angels, quartettes, buck and wing dancers”; along with Attucks, Wheatley, and Douglass there would be elocutionist Peaches Grindy, “sweet singer” Cely Dumbfounded, and “funny man” Ivanhoe Baxter. At the heart of the story was once again the Blossom family—and Zeek Blossom, the “mischievous moke” and starring role which McClain reserved for himself.⁶¹

McClain unmoored the old plantation from timeless tradition and returned it to history. Set during the Civil War, the plantation episode of *Before and After the War* was the only one McClain seems to have written to completion. It was on one hand a pointed reversal, turning the benign pastoral into a setting of forced labor, inhuman horror, and yearning for escape; on the other hand it fixated on Zeke’s ambivalence at the cusp of freedom. McClain cast Zeke as a field overseer nervously watching his fellow slaves light out for the Union line, and dramatized his choice between staying with his family and escaping the ever-present threat of the master’s violence. McClain demonstrated the master’s cruelty throughout. The master not only threatens

rather than comic acting. Moreover, the white Carter likely wouldn’t have taken second billing to fellow minstrel star Billy Williams, and the black Carter would likely have been touring with the Canadian Jubilee Singers and Imperial Orchestra. See Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, 94; “Old Minstrel Dead: ‘Billy’ Carter, Once Famous, Dies in Poverty in Brooklyn,” *NYT* (Dec. 19, 1912); *OOS*, 176, 373.

⁶¹ The cast list alluded to appearances (not dramatized in this copy) of Revolutionary War hero Crispus Attucks, poet Phyllis Wheatley (to be played by Cordelia McClain), and “The Great Statesman” Frederick Douglass; McClain, “Before and After the War,” 1, 33.

torture at every turn (“Oh, I flog you within an inch of your life”) but attempts to kill the child Clyde Blossom, revealed to be not Zeke’s but his own son, by throwing the child into the cane press before an extraordinarily nimble Aunt Peggy “saves [him] just in time from being crushed.”⁶² While Whallen and Martell’s version of *Uncle Eph* made a farce of the black family and erased slavery’s violence, McClain used the same framework—with no little debt to *Uncle Tom*—to dramatize the black family’s corruption at the hand of the master. Yet even with the Union army approaching, Zeke chooses to remain with his wife and raise his (unbeknownst to him?) master’s illegitimate son while covering for his fellow slaves’ self-emancipation. McClain zeroed in on this moment of equivocation. When the master catches on to Zeke’s deception, and threatens Peggy with a bull whip, Zeke does not strike but negotiates:

Hold on, Master, don’t strike – You knows dat aint right. I’d rather for you to take my life than hit my ‘tended wife. . . . She has stuck to me as tight as wax. Yes, and you when you was at de point of death, and many ‘s the time we’s worked all day in your fields without a crust of bread, although we moves, and no place to go. Dats if you should drive us out and away, but I’d rather take my chances with de world, den see her hoop anyday.⁶³

Like *Uncle Eph*, and not unlike *Uncle Tom*, Zeke harps on the appeal of the sentimental slave and his devoted service to his master; unlike his models, McClain’s Zeke acted in a drama at once inside and outside the structures of plantation nostalgia. McClain cast Zeke in the pose of not a hero of slave emancipation but of a Hamlet, hedging his “chances” against terrifying servitude and uncertain freedom in “de world.”

Rather than an attempt to represent the literal consciousness of the enslaved, McClain’s rendering of Zeke can be seen as a deeper play in the structure of the plantation performance: he displaced the source of Zeke’s comedy from the slave plantation to Zeke’s creative labor.

McClain set Zeke askance from the plantation through a heavy dose of irony, blocking the scene

⁶² McClain, “Before and After the War,” 23, 22.

⁶³ McClain, “Before and After the War,” 24.

with the master's back turned and Zeke striking a "sarcastic" pose at the audience.⁶⁴ Zeke can thus be added to a long tradition of "trickster" figures in African American culture. Alongside Charles Chesnutt's Uncle Julius, whose "conjure woman" stories had been recently published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, or Sandy Jenkins, the slave who tries to warn Frederick Douglass off from escape but whose conjure root seems to protect Douglass from facing the master's punishment, Zeke was in but not of slavery, able to manipulate its social relations while preserving a consciousness and will not subordinated to the master's knowledge and desire.⁶⁵ While McClain did not pose Zeke as an agent of resistance or escape, he used him to establish a temporality for African American freedom apart from the plantation master and the Union army.⁶⁶ Freed from his master, but before the arrival of a mounted Union General carrying a sweeping version of the Emancipation Proclamation, McClain highlighted Zeke's clowning again in a stereotypical plantation scene of "possum" cooking and wing dancing that is just as soon dismissed as "jim crow foolishness" by Peggy; this "foolishness," which McClain envisioned to be both performed and disavowed by the African American cast, marks less the actual history of slavery than its performance on stage. When the scene shifts to Reconstruction, McClain shed Zeke's mask for the more heroic pose of an African American lawyer Macon Allen, as if to repurpose the dexterity of the clown for the rhetorical dexterity of the jurist. Whereas Whallen and Martell used Zeke to parody racial romanticism to denude the emancipatory potential of black

⁶⁴ McClain paid special attention to this scene, polishing it once more to make Zeke/Zeek even more assertive and clarify the "sarcastic" blocking ("Before and After the War," 27-28).

⁶⁵ Lawrence W. Levine offers a sympathetic account of Sandy's "superstitions" by recreating the "perspective of Sandy Jenkins, who was not fortunate enough to write his own memoirs"; see *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 68-71.

⁶⁶ Holt, *Children of Fire*, 185-236; Walter Johnson, "Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery," in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 148-167; Michael Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999), 245-268; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

performance, McClain reconstituted the plantation clown to sarcastically chide white nostalgia for the slave plantation and to eke out new ground for black cultural representation from within the plantation tradition. Speaking in one voice while gesturing with contrary desires if not actions, McClain turned Zeke into a dangerous supplement: the genuine article at the center of Whallen and Martell's plantation fantasy, McClain showed, was also a genuine actor.⁶⁷

In McClain's rendition, moreover, Zeke more pointedly unveiled the comedic work of the African American actor behind the blackface mask. Indeed, Zeke lived on after *Before and After the War* as a strange kind of alter-ego for McClain himself, his irony and dexterity suited to the corporatizing amusement industry.⁶⁸ The contradictory positions of *Before and After the War* likely reflected the tensions in McClain's own position in the amusement industry which desired his "authentic" connection to slavery while demanding that connection be contained in a minstrel caricature of the slave. But if he felt the same sense of double consciousness named by W. E. B. Du Bois and endured by fellow black performers like Bert Williams and George Walker, he also used that alienation as a position from which to envision an alternative trajectory for black cultural history.⁶⁹ McClain used Zeke Blossom as a pseudonym to publish an article about himself. Listing his involvement in *South Before the War*, *Darkest America*, and *Black America*—but omitting any mention of slavery and of his own *Before and After the War*—McClain framed his "meteoric career" in theater in relation to racial progress since slavery.

⁶⁷ For the concept of the dangerous supplement, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Minority Histories," in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 112-13; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 140-164.

⁶⁸ For the poetics of self-fashioning in a corporate economy, see James, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution*; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁶⁹ For the experience of "double consciousness" by turn-of-the-century black performers, see David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*; Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last Darcy: Bert Williams, Black-On-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

McClain was no less “to the theatrical world what Fred Douglass was, and Booker T. Washington is, to the educational phase of the negro race of today.” Above all, *Black America* “was the most stupendous thing of its kind every attempted by and for colored people [sic].”⁷⁰ McClain continued his performance of Zeke to portray himself as a nexus between the emancipatory politics of black slave culture and the incorporating economy of public amusements. Writing to black railroad porters in 1902—an audience especially attuned to the challenges of minority political expression within an incorporating economy—“Zeke” announced McClain’s creation of a Colored Comedy Carnival Company (“a new aggregation of amusements”) and his faith that “huge proportions” would secure black ownership over a share of cultural production in the United States.⁷¹

Though the ironic mode allowed McClain to recalibrate the representation of the slave and stage his own big dreams of corporate power, it did not prove durable enough to withstand the likes of Salsbury, whose entrenched position in the field of public amusements allowed him to assert a starker racial hierarchy. Nate Salsbury had a harsher sense of irony. Before the Wild West, he launched his theatrical career as manager of Salsbury’s Troubadours, a “farce comedy” act that got its start opening for Hooley’s Minstrels. Like other white minstrel troupes, the Troubadours quickly broke from Hooley and from blackface to strive for a more refined image. They sought to combine, as one showbill had it, “opera with comedy burlesque,” appealing “directly to the taste of the most refined and intellectual.” His show and his public persona would

⁷⁰ Zeke Blossom [Billy McClain], “Comedy Genius Billy McClain” (c. 1900s?), 1, unpublished typescript ms. Clipping files, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁷¹ Zeke Blossom [Billy McClain], “The Negro Actor—A Factor,” *Railroad Porters and Waiters Magazine* 6.10 (June 1902), 2, in box 3, folder 9, Phillip Sterling Research Materials on Bert Williams, *T-Mss 1991-026, BRTD. For black railroad porters as an especially politicized group, see Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 2-3, 70-71; Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 1; for a later period, Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

be remembered as the opposite of minstrelsy: “clean and respectable.”⁷² Yet he was not shy about producing racist farce in real life. In 1873, during a stop on the Troubadours’ first tour in Bloomington, Indiana, Salsbury refused to admit a young African-American ticketholder to the show, happily enforcing the theater’s black code against the child’s insistent declarations of equal rights. When Salsbury later spied a black figure walking up to the balcony, he punched him from behind, sending whom he thought was the young troublemaker careening down the stairs. This was supposed to be the punchline: the figure was not the boy but the theater’s janitor. Salsbury duly apologized by tossing the man a cigar and a quarter—“When I could stop laughing.”⁷³ For Salsbury African Americans were the object and not the authors of comedy in the theater, just as they would receive and not deliver violence in real life.

Unlike Whallen and Martell, Salsbury was a staunch Unionist. In the plantation show phenomenon and McClain’s drama of “negro evolution” in particular Salsbury saw the basis for an entertainment that would have “national” appeal. Salsbury was a Union veteran, proudly (and lucratively) adorning his productions with patriotic bunting and paeans to the Grand Army of the Republic.⁷⁴ In the Wild West, Salsbury reframed William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s rodeo demonstration as a patriotic narrative of conquest and civilization, translating the violence of Indian removal at the hands of the US Cavalry into a “drama of civilization.” Likewise, Salsbury took McClain’s narrative and amplified its celebration of slave emancipation to a nationalist spectacle. Along with a march by the uniformed black soldiers of the US Ninth Cavalry (who

⁷² Contract between Salsbury and Hooley’s Minstrels (Chicago, Apr. 2, 1873), box 2, folder 56, Salsbury Papers; playbill for Salsbury’s Troubadours, John T. Ford Theaters (Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, n.d.), in box 2, folder 56, Salsbury Papers; Rev. David James Burrell, “My Showman Friend” (May, 1903), in box 2, folder 59, Salsbury Papers. For Salsbury’s “complicated” relation with blackface, see Joy F. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 214.

⁷³ Nate Salsbury, “The Wrong Coon” (n.d.), in Reminiscences (photocopies), box 2, folder 64, Salsbury Papers.

⁷⁴ Like many of his fellow veterans, he can be counted among the reunited but unreconciled Northerners wary of equating their cause to the Confederacy in a wash of common valor and sacrifice. See Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

had served in the Indian Wars), the show concluded with a “historical apotheosis” in which the assembled hundreds of African American performers, costumed as slaves, sang jubilee and patriotic songs before illuminated projections of John Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ulysses S. Grant, and Abraham Lincoln. Like the Wild West, *Black America* had to balance nature and culture in its representation of race: the historic plantation, like the frontier, was both a pastoral and the site of the nation’s progress. But the plantation setting sharpened this tension into an outright contradiction: the history in which the Union was victorious was the same history that eradicated the plantation pastoral by emancipating the slave and made him a citizen.⁷⁵

Salsbury attempted to displace this contradiction from the temporality of history to an unchanging social biology. Salsbury presented his plantation as an “exhibition,” borrowing partly from the Wild West but also from the “living” exhibits made immensely popular by the World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago two years before. In Chicago’s “Dahomey Village,” many of the “natural” Africans were in fact African-American performers hired in the US (and, in the San Francisco show, future vaudevillians Bert Williams and George Walker); those who were not were likely Samoans and members of the African Fon tribe, who were acclimatized to modernity through contact with the Western colonial regimes. Of course, in these exhibits all of black life was rendered immune to historical change, a view which came to support racist social science, the rise of Jim Crow racial segregation in the South, and the practice of imperial conquest in the western frontier and soon the Spanish Caribbean and Philippines.⁷⁶ As African American critics Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass protested, exhibiting modern black people in the frame of timeless “nature” collapsed the distinctions between slave and free, “savage” and “refined,”

⁷⁵ Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, 222-36; Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 19.

⁷⁶ For *Black America* as an example of the connection between empire, racist social science, and the politics of national reunion, see Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 135-36.

which were at the crux of contemporary middle-class black progressive politics.⁷⁷ It was also at the crux of McClain's *Before and After the War* and Salsbury's own nationalism. Salsbury's exhibition therefore had to walk a fine line between celebrating national progress and undoing racial progress, demonstrating abolition while undoing emancipation. One showbill distilled these contradictions, announcing in block letters a concert of the "Freedmen of the South" which was also a "Majestic Sociological and Patriotic Ensemble, Closing with a Superb Historical Apothesis [sic]."⁷⁸

Salsbury made his strongest revision to McClain's script by evacuating it of narrative. *Black America* was not only an exhibition without history but also a performance without a script.⁷⁹ Insisting to the press that the performers were "natural," Salsbury effectively undid McClain's ironic position and with it the play's demonstration of emancipation. In an interview given to the *Washington Post* four years later, Salsbury remembered of *Black America* that "the negro's" "remarkable sense of rhythm," and the "negro voice" was the "most powerful, sweet, and resonant organ possessed by any member of the human race." But the "negro" was no actor:

No, I do not care for the negro in comedy. When he is himself he is funny, but when he tries to be funny, he overdoes it. The white man can imitate a negro, but no negro that I have ever seen was a success as an actor. Singing and dancing are the negro's specialties, and he will do well to stick to them as closely as possible.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Holt, *Children of Fire*, 187-209; Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 24-26; Christopher Reed, *All the World Is Here!: The Black Presence at the White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), chap. 8. In *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Andrew Zimmerman finds not only that the techniques of anthropological display of colonial subjects emerged from the "ethnographic" displays in public amusements, but also that many of the "natural" subjects themselves were actually self-consciously modern, and able to negotiate the business and representation of the display: thus the "'paradigmatic' study of natural peoples was unable to wrest the individuals under consideration from history, even though the lack of history was supposed to be a defining characteristic of natural peoples" (22).

⁷⁸ Program for *Black America* (Boston, 1895), supplement to *Boston Daily Standard*, item 250 in American Minstrel Show Collection, THE B MS Thr 556, Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University; a partial handbill for a different showing uses much of the same language: handbill for *Black America* (n.p., 1895), in folder S, box 2, American Minstrel Show Collection, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University.

⁷⁹ Likewise, Salsbury and Cody insisted that they only gave "broad outlines" to their cowboy and Indian performers: Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business*, 19.

⁸⁰ "The Stage," *Washington Post* (Apr. 23, 1899), 24.

Comedic acting was dangerous to Salsbury's representation because it implied the capacity not only to say one thing and mean another but also to act "naturally" while acting in history. Like McClain, Salsbury identified in the comic role a dangerous supplement to plantation nostalgia; but instead of amplifying it he excised it. If Whallen and Martell produced their "genuine" slave by parodying and killing off the sentimental Uncle, Salsbury's was a cruel kind of comedy that resonated with a more pernicious ideology of race: the "negro" could be a clown without being a comedian for the same reason a black person could be unfree without being a slave—because they could represent no more than "themselves." To be sure, Salsbury might very well have been alluding to the cohort of professional black composers and actors who, in the wake of the failed plantation shows, were then making careers for themselves in vaudeville and on Broadway. But it was also a callous dig at McClain, his erstwhile stage manager who by then had embarked to Australia for one of his many foreign sojourns from *Jim Crow*.

In the span of three years Whallen and Martell, McClain, and Salsbury worked over and revised the same script of plantation nostalgia. By 1895 the result was variety rather than order, but the stakes had come into sharp focus. If Whallen and Martell narrated a guiltless return to slavery and McClain narrated the race's progress out of it, Salsbury split the difference by writing African Americans out of history while preserving them as specimens of a timeless racial order. The show was no doubt calibrated to appeal to white Northerners who could enjoy the progress marked by abolition without the change marked by the figure of the black freedman. But more so: these authors produced their narratives not only to contest the memory of slavery and freedom in the established stage tropes of the old plantation; they were also attempting to exploit and contain the energies of an amusement marketplace being rapidly transformed by industrial capital and African American cultural labor.

III. Slaves, Trains, and Automated Amusement Machines

Asked about the origins of *Black America* nearly fifty years after its debut, its white stage manager Harry Tarleton recalled Salsbury hatching the plan at an informal gathering in the Actors Club in New York City in the winter of 1895. Salsbury wagered he could make a success of “an all colored musical show to tour America and then Europe.” When his colleagues “said it could not be done,” he struck the pose of a bold risk-taker: “I will show you fellows it can.”⁸¹ Tarleton’s account is surely apocryphal, omitting not only the show’s derivation from Whallen and Martell’s *The South Before the War* and McClain’s *Before and After the War*, but also the financial failure of the Wild West for which *Black America* was designed to compensate. McClain’s motives were no less grandiose or pecuniary. In the recollection of fellow black actor Tom Fletcher, after McClain “sold [Whallen and Martell] on the idea” of *South Before the War*, he was spurred “to put on a big novelty extravaganza, a cavalcade of colored people, in some large outdoor arena.” Just like Salsbury, McClain faced the doubt of his peers; “most of them gave him the laugh.” How could a black actor secure a venue, let alone the capital, for the “scenery and salaries for the number of people he wanted”? Relying on a preternatural gumption, McClain found Salsbury—instead of Salsbury finding him—and was able to translate his vision into reality with the financial backing of a powerful “promoter of large enterprises.”⁸²

More than two-bit minstrels, Salsbury and McClain played the part of savvy businessmen and masters of corporate organization. Emerging out of an industrializing field of racial amusement, the plantation spectacular and its uniquely interracial social formation experimented

⁸¹ Recount of *Black America* by Harry Tarleton, written down for Rebecca [Salsbury] James in 1947, Taos, N.M., 1-2, in box 1, folder 24, Reminiscences of Nathan Salsbury, 1899-1943, *T-Mss 1961-005, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Page references are to the typescript copy. (An identical copy is also available in the Nathan Salsbury Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.)

⁸² Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, 29, 91.

in producing memories of slavery and emancipation for an age of intensifying racial segregation and national (white) reunion. But while managers and performers grappled over the meaning of slavery and freedom in the script, behind the scenes they negotiated the terms of labor in the amusement industry more directly. In Tarleton and Fletcher's competing recollections of managerial heroism, the choice of slavery as a theme was almost incidental, just another speculative investment in the hurly-burly economy of public amusements: *Black America* began as a risky venture whose success required the daring-do and entrepreneurial wherewithal of its lone producer, whether black or white. Yet however mystifying, their accounts reflected deeper conflicts over the ownership of the nation's cultural future. As white showmen and black actors staged America's drama of master and slave, they performed contrapuntal roles of manager and employee that tested the transformative possibilities of new forms of mechanical reproduction.

For all their blustery talk about "genuine articles" and "real" plantations, the material and scripts used by the plantation showmen had the mundane and immediate origin in economic depression. For Salsbury and McClain, just as much as for Whallen and Martell, the ownership of the symbols of blackness was meant to generate tangible wealth and less tangible cultural capital. They did so not only by refabricating and revising old material but by transforming physical property. In an interview before the show's Boston opening, Salsbury explained the origins of the Brooklyn show both as a novel idea and as a rational financial hedge. Salsbury's Ambrose Park fairground was

a valuable piece of property and we could not afford to have it idle all the time, so I arranged for an Italian industrial exhibit. But at a critical time this sickness came on me, and the details which I was unable to attend to dragged on until I had to abandon the idea. Then I cast about in my mind for something to put in there, and I wanted something that

should be purely national in color and a novelty, and this idea of a picture of the South occurred to me. I carried it out.⁸³

Though surely embellished, Salsbury's recollection told a basic truth: his dream of the "picture of the South," almost arbitrarily, originated not in his mind but in the "valuable piece of property" made unproductive by personal and economic depression. But if Salsbury owned the land, McClain had access to an immense cultural capital accrued from his years on the amusement circuit: his knowledge of and relationships with black performers in and around New York City. In his "interview" with Zeke Blossom, McClain described the success of *Black America* as both "stupendous" and almost facile:

Why, I've had charge of these and similar productions for years and it seems quite easy. I experienced the same results with 'Black America,' which by the way, was the most stupendous thing of its kind every attempted by and for colored [sic] people, and I might well add that in successfully staging and producing the last named play I conclusively demonstrated my creative and executive ability.⁸⁴

"I carried it out." "It seems quite easy." Whatever political visions they had—Salsbury produced *Black America* for the nation, and McClain for the race—the plantation spectacular began as frictionless expressions of "creative and executive ability," a "novelty" meant to generate profit from fallow resources, whether black talent or idle land.

Yet the contrasting views also reflected a more acrimonious tension between capital and labor, one expressed starkly in race. Managers of plantation spectacles sold slavery in no small part by selling themselves as masters of industry. At a time when the businessman was a symbol of control for a nation "in search of order," plantation showmen cultivated airs of individual command and entrepreneurial gusto over the distended forces their businesses seemed to conjure

⁸³ "An American Manipulator: How 'Black America' Came to Pass—Who Conceived It," *Boston Transcript* (July 1895), in *Black America Scrapbook*, MWEZ n.c. 4650, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter abbreviated BAS).

⁸⁴ Blossom [McClain], "Comedy Genius Billy McClain," 1-2.

out of thin air.⁸⁵ They gave shape to their roles not on the stage but in iconography charged with racial difference. Newspaper advertisements for *Black America* hailed Salsbury as “Sole Director” over “500 Jet Black Southern Darkies,” while the show’s official letterhead represented “Black America” with a portrait of Salsbury himself (fig. 1.3).⁸⁶ The same marketing strategy was used by Whallen and Martell. The cover of a promotional brochure for *The South Before the War* promised audiences nothing less than “the Greatest Production of the Present Century”; in the interior, explicit textual and visual references to slavery (“Old Plantation Character,” “a Plethora of Pure Plantation Pastimes”) were paired with references to the show’s scale and the manager’s business acumen. It assured viewers not only of the authenticity of the show’s representation a slave plantation, but also the prestige of a company which could afford a “\$12,000 Pullman Palace Car” (figs. 1.4-6).⁸⁷ Martell’s company letterhead made the dynamic even more visible. Like Salsbury’s “white express,” and made to impress theater managers and booking agents no less than audiences, the letterhead featured Martell’s serene visage over an image of black actors spilling out of the company’s train cars (fig. 1.7).

While the showmen likely meant to displace audience anxieties about modern machinery by pairing it with comical racist caricature, they also alluded to a rich symbolic and historical association between African American labor and the railroad. The mythical black rail-splitter John Henry had stood for the dignity of human labor over the technological automaton in white

⁸⁵ For businessmen as “leading men” and symbols of American individualism in an era of increasing corporate consolidation, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 17-27; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 80-81. For the social, political, legal, and economic disorder caused by incorporation in production and distribution, and the rise of a managerial class, see also Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinental and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Norton, 2011); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977); Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁸⁶ *New York Times* (28 June 1895), 7.

⁸⁷ Before Whallen left Martell as sole proprietor of *The South Before the War*, the promotional brochure did not stress the talent of the management but its claims to spectacle were no less hyperbolic. See program for Whallen and Martell’s *South Before the War* (5 Feb. 1894), in *South Before the War* clipping file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection.

and black working class cultures. By the 1890s, the association had been “domesticated” in no small part by the Pullman Company, whose African American Pullman porters dressed the machine with the elegance of human service. But such contrasting images belied the more vibrant social contest in which African Americans used the train car as a stage to enact their membership in industrial society. Actual Pullman porters used their positions to accumulate wealth and middle-class respectability—the very group to whom Billy McClain addressed his vision of enterprise and uplift. But more dramatically, just as *The South Before the War* began its inaugural tour in June 1892, the New Orleans Comité des Citoyens (a local chapter of American Citizens’ Equal Rights Association) and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company concocted their own performance as a pointed legal challenge to the constitutionality of racial segregation. The Comité arranged for Homer Plessy, a New Orleans cobbler, to sit in a white-only car. So light-skinned that he would have been unrecognizable as “black” without the silent collaboration of the train conductor, Plessy’s arrest dramatized not only the arbitrariness of racial distinctions but also the survival of slavery’s system of racial caste in the very engine of modern commerce. As Justice Marshall Harlan wrote in his dissent to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the doctrine of “separate but equal” upheld by the Supreme Court effectively gutted the Thirteenth Amendment and marked African American citizens with an odious “badge of servitude.” The majority opinion at once provided the legal warrant for Jim Crow and made a powerful symbolic gesture against black aspirations in the corporate industrial economy.⁸⁸

Before *Plessy v. Ferguson* was argued before the Supreme Court, plantation spectacles like *The South Before the War* and *Black America* seemed to anticipate Harlan’s dark premonition that Jim Crow laws would allow technological progress to proceed while returning African Americans to slavery. Yet the performers employed to play as slaves used these cars to

⁸⁸ *Plessy v. Ferguson* 163 U.S. 537; Holt, *Children of Fire*, 214-218.

stage a counter-drama not unlike Plessy's on the Louisville and Nashville line. While the symbolic association between black performers and the company train car reinforced the hierarchy between the modern producer and the "genuine Southern darky" in the image of the "white express," it betrayed the production's material need of professionally-trained African American performers, who in another photograph produced a different association between blackness and modernity themselves in fine clothes in front of the South Before the War Pullman car (fig. 1.8).

In the broadsheet for *Black America's* Ambrose Park show, the African American performers were described as if they were merchandise, "collected from all parts of America" in order to be "employed" (see fig. 1). But in fact the showmen likely did not "collect" rural Southerners to play the role of black slaves. Far from the "genuine" product of a timeless rural South, their workforce was largely comprised of a mobile cohort of professional entertainers. Running an ad in the *New York Clipper* through a theatrical agent, Whallen and Martell called for "Clever Colored Talent" with "experience, refinement and culture," as well as ability in a host of black cultural styles—from cake walking to plantation melodies, quadrilles to buck dancing. Focusing their call on the urban eastcoast, they asked potential talent to "telegraph at once for our Spectacular Production" whose headquarters was in Louisville, Kentucky.⁸⁹ Once again, Salsbury attempted to outdo Whallen and Martell on their own terms, not only advertising the genuineness of his performers but also insisting to the press that "every one of the 493 negroes comes from the Sunny South," his white agents "spent the greater part of the winter traveling through the South selecting the talent."⁹⁰ Of course, it seems just as likely, and more affordable, that Salsbury delegated the recruiting of black actors, musicians, and dancers to Billy McClain

⁸⁹ *New York Clipper* (16 April 1892), in *OOS*, 361.

⁹⁰ "Black America on View," *Brooklyn Eagle* (24 May 1895), 7. Even if true, some performers scouted in the South were apparently more "genuine" than others: "for every one he engaged he rejected at least nine."

and his assistant Bob Russell. McClain and Russell could use their connections in the eastcoast entertainment industry to audition, hire, and rehearse the “good colored talent which,” as Tom Fletcher would remember, “was available in abundance.”⁹¹

Managers of plantation shows attempted to regulate the movement of their performers not simply on the stage with a script but off-stage with a labor contract. In an interview with the *Boston Transcript*, Salsbury disclaimed his image as a “disciplinarian” over his workforce and instead proclaimed his benevolent managerial style: “We treat them well.” Because he enforced labor discipline not by threat of force but through the law of contract, “every man of them has his contract in his pocket, or elsewhere.” While he did not detail the contents of his contract with his workers, he relished its power to manage his workforce. Though “we give them to understand that there is but little required of them beside attending to the business for which they are engaged,” Salsbury alluded to moments of labor conflict in a manner both vague and decisive: “If they don’t care to do that, we set them right out. There’s no argument, no chance for it.”⁹² The prospect of utter control over a pliant workforce may have been another motive for Salsbury to put the Wild West on hiatus and launch an “all-colored” amusement: Salsbury’s Native American performers were more expensive than black performers.⁹³ Though exact business records from the *Black America* show are scant, Tarleton later remembered the wages for the black “chorus”

⁹¹ Fletcher, *100 Years*, 29, 94; for Russell’s role, see Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 303.

⁹² “An American Manipulator.”

⁹³ By 1894, the cultural labor of Indian performers was made less flexible when the US Bureau of Indian Affairs began to regulate the terms of their exhibition. Salsbury would have to post a bond of \$10,000 per 100 Indians for their safe and timely return to their reservations, as well as provide for their salary, clothing, food, and an approved interpreter. In addition, Salsbury paid his Native American performers \$25 a month as a brave, squaw, or child, or \$75 (plus proceeds from merchandise) as a chief—still less than the average national wage of \$20 per week. The bureau’s beneficence went hand in hand with America’s policy of military expansion into Native American lands. Indeed, the Wild West show in more than one way augmented these policies not only in ideology but also, by absorbing and “civilizing” Indian labor, by acting as a kind of touring reservation; in 1890, the US Army sent thirty Native Americans captured at Wounded Knee to work for Salsbury instead of imprisoning them. Sarah J. Blackstone, *Buckskins Bullets, and Business: a History of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 86-87.

(the bulk of the cast) to be between \$3 to \$5 per week (\$12 to \$20 per month), in addition to the lodging they received living in re-created slave cabins, the food they ate from the show's "mess hall," and the plantation costumes they wore as clothes.⁹⁴ If the momentous passage from slavery to freedom in the United States was underwritten by the replacement of the social relations of bondage with those of the free labor contract, Salsbury reversed that history behind the scenes, using the contract to ensure his wage workers acted as slaves around the clock.⁹⁵

Salsbury's *Black America* exposed the vulnerabilities which would befall all plantation spectacles as organizations of African American cultural labor. Despite his cultivated image of supreme managerial mastery, Salsbury's reign over his black employees was no more complete than his competitors'. His cast of 300 black actors—reduced from 500 after the Ambrose Park debut—proved too unwieldy and expensive for Salsbury's company to tour through Europe as he originally intended. More crucially, Salsbury's posture belied the fluidity within the labor market for black performers that the plantation spectacular exploited and stimulated.⁹⁶

Though they premised their spectacles on their possession of the timeless "old time darkey," the plantation showmen could hardly disguise the skill and training of their black performers. In white and black newspapers, press notices and reviews for *The South Before the War*, *Slavery Days*, and the *Old South Company* mixed wonderment of the "realistic" sight of a

⁹⁴ Tarleton, "Recount of Black America," 1.

⁹⁵ Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁹⁶ Formerly limited to small regional troupes of touring minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows, black actors in plantation shows had access to larger theatres in major cities across the nation. Assisted by the telegraph, intercontinental railroads, and trade newspapers such as the *New York Clipper* and the black-owned weekly *Indianapolis Freeman*, black and white producers and talent agents could discover pools of professional or aspiring black talent with less regard to the contingencies of time and space. When Tom Fletcher received his first break in 1888 with Howard's Novelty Minstrels, Howard himself negotiated with Fletcher's mother over wages (settled at \$5 per week plus room and board); not ten years later, Fletcher acts as his own agent and is hired by the Georgia Minstrels in 1897 after answering an ad in a theatrical magazine. Tom Fletcher describes the earlier moment in his memoir, recalling being asked to recruit "pickanninies" from among local boys by a manager of a regional Uncle Tom's Cabin show; Fletcher neglects to scout and instead presents himself for the role. Earlier in the 1890s, Fletcher was recruited for the *In Old Kentucky* show by a theatrical agent representing a New York-based theatrical company, Litt & Dingwall (no relation). See Fletcher, *100 Years*, 7-13, 20-23.

gathered mass of “darkies singing and picking cotton” while admiring the professional roster of performers who played them.⁹⁷ Without a sense of contradiction, reporters who visited the grounds of *Black America* described the “natural” performances of an anonymous mass of hundreds of black men and women while praising the trained ability of named singers and musicians. While reveling in the spectacle of “some 300 negro men and women . . . brought direct from the fields and plantations of the South,” one Philadelphia reviewer of *Black America* could also perceive among the mass “such Southern celebrities” such as Cuban acrobat Pablo Diaz and “noted colored soprano” Bessie Lee, “who has already been seen and heard in Philadelphia.”⁹⁸ A more discerning reviewer for the *New York Herald* also admired the show, but delighted instead in the “300 persons employed for this production,” several of whom he singled out for praise by name as soloists, quartettes, and dancers.⁹⁹ Cordelia McClain—Billy’s wife—received special notice. Trained as a choral singer and performing as a Jubilee singer with the Nashville Students, Cordelia took her talents to the racial amusement circuit, meeting her husband on the cast of *The South Before the War*. By 1895, the Boston press noted her “sweet and high and strong soprano” and described her bearing as “decorous and quite like a dignified prima donna.”¹⁰⁰

As press notices and cast rosters indicate, the plantation shows’ star performers perceived their value in the market and exercised their volition when the chance arose. Performance scholars Daphne Brooks and Jayna Brown have shown that African American women performers such as Cordelia McClain crafted “decorous” images while drawing on black cultural forms to express their modern gender and racial identities on the stage.¹⁰¹ The actors in the plantation

⁹⁷ *New York Clipper* ([ref], 13 Oct. 1894), in *OOS*, 365-66.

⁹⁸ “Grand Opera House: Black America.”

⁹⁹ “‘Black America’ Back: Nate Salisbury’s [sic] Show Delights an Audience in Madison Square Garden,” *New York Herald* (n.d.), Black America scrapbook, BRTD.

¹⁰⁰ “‘Black America’: A Novel and Excellent Entertainment at the Circus Grounds,” n.p. [Boston?] (July 1895), in Black America Scrapbook, BRTD.

¹⁰¹ See Brown, *Babylon Girls* and Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*.

shows took even more concrete steps behind the scenes. After successful showcases on *The South Before the War* in 1893, the Standard Quartet of Chicago and the Twilight Quartet translated their celebrity into independent touring acts by 1894; the Eclipse Quartet was poached by Spitz's *Slavery Days* show. After joining the South Before the War Company band in 1894, black conductor Frank M. Hailstock, Jr., quickly moved to Field's *Darkest America* where he led the orchestra until his death from pneumonia in 1899. Trombonist Fred W. Simpson played with the *Darkest America* orchestra before leaving the plantation show circuit entirely in 1900 by joining Williams & Walker's touring vaudeville show, *Sons of Ham*.¹⁰² Beginning his career as a "pincanniny" in *The South Before the War* in 1892, dancer Billy Robinson rose out of the plantation show circuit and secured steady gigs in New York City in the Bowery and Coney Island. Besting rival Harry Swinton (of the *In Old Kentucky* company) in a buck and wing competition in 1900, Robinson would turn the "plantation" amusement into tap dancing and reinvent himself for vaudeville and later cinema with a new name: Bojangles.¹⁰³ Even if they did not find fame and fortune in the amusement industry, as most did not, the black performers in the plantation spectacles saw their roles as "slaves" as contingent employment. At least a few were either fired or quit in the middle of a tour, leaving their managers in the lurch. Somewhere between Hartford and New Britain, Connecticut, Whallen and Martell spent \$6 to hire "extra people" for their choir of "genuine Southern darkies."¹⁰⁴

Certain African American performers posed an even bigger existential challenge to the plantation spectacular as a stage production when they brought their talents to the entrepreneurs behind new automated amusement machines. The Standards took advantage of Edison's wax cylinder phonograph, a new technology that could record three minutes of live sound, reproduce

¹⁰² OOS, 368, 332-33.

¹⁰³ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 20-21.

¹⁰⁴ "Expenses," in box 1, folder 1, SBWC.

it in thousands of copies, and distribute it nationwide. While touring on their own and with *South Before the War*, the Standards recorded with the spate of new companies that had licensed Edison's invention: Columbia Phonograph Company (New York), the Ohio Phonograph Company (Cleveland, Cincinnati), and the US Phonograph Company (Newark).¹⁰⁵ At the very same time, *South Before the War* cast member James Grundy marketed his wares for another Edison machine: the kinetoscope. In January 1895, Grundy by himself and with a dance partner performed the buck and wing and a cake walk for three fifty-foot reels. A precursor to tap, Grundy's buck and wing was sold by Edison as a glimpse of authentic black culture held over from the days of slavery while it sated desires for the novel motion of the black dancer and the very sensation of motion pictures. Though wax cylinders and kinetoscope companies had limited distribution and viewings restricted to individual booths in downtown amusement parlors, and though ownership over these means of mechanical reproduction would later be held almost strictly by large corporations, their early attraction to the "old plantation" reveal how its cultural value was being held and negotiated by African American performers. If plantation showmen sought to transform their labor force into "genuine Southern darkies," ones "natural" and untouched by history, that labor recognized the fungible value of their voices and bodies and sold them to owners of automated amusement machines.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Columbia Phonograph Company, announcement, Apr. 11, 1894, quoted in Brooks, *Lost Sounds*, 96; see also *ibid.*, 96-100. For the development and decline of phonograph parlors as a discrete space of public amusement, see Nasaw, *Going Out*, 125-27.

¹⁰⁶ Nor was Grundy alone. In autumn and winter of 1894, Thomas Edison welcomed to his Black Maria film studio in West Orange, New Jersey, the dancers, acrobats, and show people who were across the Hudson in New York for the theatrical season. On October 6, black dancers Joe Rastus, Denny Tolliver, and Walter Wilkins, who were performing as "pickaninnies" in a vaudeville revue, danced a "breakdown" before the camera; the scene was being advertised in catalogues as late as 1898 to "represent[] Southern plantation life before the war." Among the coterie visiting Edison were the Native American and other "exotic" performers of the Wild West Show. On September 24, a contingent of Native American dancers trekked down from Ambrose Park to performer in front of Edison's kinetoscope camera—the Native Americans insisted on painting their own colors for the "Sioux Ghost Dance"; see Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 137-38. Information about the films' production and marketing is from Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press,

The South Before the War and *Black America* sold the raw primitiveness of the “old” plantation and the gleaming power of the modern machine, held together by the sure and steady hand of the white manager on the black body. But singers like the Standards and dancers like Grundy bespoke not only disorder in the system of labor organization and commodification but also existential incoherence in the “old plantation” itself. In one brochure the “genuine” performer was identical to the old fashioned slave: “What is more enjoyable than to listen to the singing, by genuine colored people, of the good old fashioned melodies which were sung on the plantations years ago[?]”¹⁰⁷ Yet in other programs, perhaps advertising to more urbane or even largely African American audiences, they pitched their cake walk as “characteristic” of the antebellum plantation *and* “the greatest sensation of [our] age.” At one performance in Washington, D.C., capitalizing on the “vogue” the cake-walk enjoyed in urban dance halls, they concluded the show with a cakewalk contest which invited local dancers to the stage.¹⁰⁸ Set to forty year-old Stephen Foster plantation melodies and the season’s popular songs, *The South Before the War* used this material to span modernity and tradition. “The music, when modern, is certainly brand new and matchlessly mellifluous,” Martell wrote. “[A]nd where it is not modern, consists of the ‘old but ever new’ airs always pleasing.”¹⁰⁹

Old but ever new, this music confronted audiences with the contradictory position of African Americans performance in the social formation of the plantation spectacular. Managers could only attempt to resolve this contradiction by dissociating their performers from the amusement industry. After African American actors, musicians, and dancers left the “plant

1997), nos. 61-64, 71, 120-22, and F. Z. Maguire & Co. Catalogue (March 1898) quoted on p. 134; for Grundy, see Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Program for *The South Before the War* (Feb. 5, 1894), 7, in clippings file, BRTD.

¹⁰⁸ Program for Whallen & Martell’s “Picturesque Spectacle” *The South Before the War* (Lyceum Theatre, Washington, D.C., Nov. 27 to Dec 2, 1893), 4, in clippings file, BRTD.

¹⁰⁹ Martell, “The South Before the War,” 3. For cake walking as a style rooted in slave culture but given modern connotations and expressions by both black artists and white audiences at the turn of the century, see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*; Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*; Brown, *Babylon Girls*.

shows” of the 1890s, the form returned in diminished iterations in America’s world’s fairs, as another cohort of amusement managers attempted to renew the magic with the same formula. One even attempted to procure actual black Southerners. Repeating sentiments voiced by earlier plantation show publicity, visitors to Skip Dundy’s “Old Plantation” at the Buffalo Pan-Am Exposition in 1901 were wary of the show’s claims to authenticity. They felt it was “easy to pick up the colored people of the North and draught them into the show business” and desired instead to see “darkies of the South [who] do not take as kindly to the public rouge box.” Behind these benign complaints lay suspicion and hostility towards not only the increasing public visibility and commercial success of black performers but also the growing numbers of “colored people” in the urban North; during the previous summer white rioters in New York City targeted black vaudevillians in the largest episode of anti-black violence in the city since the 1863 draft riots. For visitors to Buffalo a year later, then, the Southern black performer was

a more valuable acquisition than the somewhat machine-made coon of the variety stage, has more of the real ginger of genuine enjoyment and gives more correctly a picture of real Southern life.¹¹⁰

Here public anxiety over African American citizenship was combined with distaste over “machine-made” culture. Yet so valuable was his acquisition, Dundy sent his actors to a performance school in Charleston run by fellow showman Fred McClellan where they learned the same songs, dances, and gestures as the “machine-made coon” they were replacing.¹¹¹

Like the earlier cohort of plantation showmen, Dundy peopled his plantation with “genuine articles,” and scripted a return to “real Southern life”—and formed a labor relationship with African American talent that could not help but associate them with a new world of standardization and professionalization. And like his predecessors, Dundy used it as a stepping

¹¹⁰ Richard Barry, *Snap Shots from the Midway of the Pan-Am Exposition* (Buffalo: Robert Allen Reid, 1901), 126; for black performers in the riot of 1900, see Sotiropolous, *Staging Race*, 40-41.

¹¹¹ Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 146-7.

stone to bigger endeavors. Running both the “Old Plantation” and “Trip to the Moon,” he presented visitors to the Buffalo exposition with escapism both nostalgic and futuristic, in effect hedging his bets against the American public’s ambivalent tastes for the real and the unreal, for racial difference and racial homogeneity, for history and futurity. But when he scouted for new diversions for his Coney Island resort, he banked not on the racial pastoral but on space travel. With an entree to the millions, Dundy left the concession business entirely in 1903 to build Luna Park—an “electric Eden” and the largest amusement park on Coney Island.¹¹²

Given what we know about white Americans’ intensifying racism and racial desire at the turn of the century, and how they would eventually flock to *The Birth of a Nation* and join the ragtime craze a decade later, another spectacular plantation would not have seemed out of place among Coney Island’s “electric Eden.” Perhaps because the figure of the black actor blurred between “natural” slave and a “machine-made” professional, Dundy bet that the distance to the moon would be easier for his audiences to traverse than the unresolved conflicts over the legacies of slave emancipation that lay along the road to the old plantation. But whatever their differences they spoke to Dundy’s canny sense of his audience’s desires to experience modernity without history and perceive in African Americans a liminal figure on the cusp of the pastoral and progress.

IV. Emancipation in Electric Lights

Nate Salsbury made conspicuous his personal guests for *Black America*’s Manhattan debut. Among those he invited to Madison Square Garden were a ferry magnate, several Wall Street brokers, and other well-heeled members of the metropolitan bourgeoisie—and a

¹¹² Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 61; Nasaw, *Going Out*, 78, 83.

contingent from the New York Cotton Exchange.¹¹³ The presence of cotton capitalists at the event was no doubt meant to sanctify the growing financial and ideological ties between the Northern and Southern bourgeois: the former warring sections could reunite, and the cotton economy could revive and industrialize, because the regime of racial labor that the “old plantation” represented could be restored.¹¹⁴ *Black America* showed an America apart, a pastoral of unchanging racial servitude at once quarantined in time and space and available for industrial exploitation—whether by the cotton economy or the cultural economy.¹¹⁵ Yet *Black America* also showed an America *blackened*. Its “genuine articles” not only gave way to glimpses of a lost past; rather than whites in blackface, it was African American performers who in their performances as slaves effected this movement out of imaginary plantations and into a “machine-made” future. Audiences saw this. In the reception of the plantation spectacular, as gleaned from press reviews and photographs, audiences assessed the value of the showmen’s product for how its African American performers might humanize the cultural future of an incorporating America.

For at least one night, Salisbury’s wealthy guests joined the thousands of more middling attendees who took streetcars, elevated trains, and ferries from around the boroughs for a night’s amusement—for the low price of a quarter—to say nothing of the thousands more who attended *Black America* showings that summer and the dozens of “plant shows” throughout the decade. Perhaps with the recent Pullman and trolley strikes in mind, these audiences sought escape to a long-ago pastoral garden, and hoped that the “genuine” figures of black slaves would reassure

¹¹³ “‘Black America’ on Parade,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1895, 9. The *New York Herald* treated the premier of *Black America* at the Garden as a society event, listing among the patrons of the boxes “the Rev. George R. Vandewater; the Rev. Father Quigley of Brooklyn; John W. Ambrose, the ferry magnate; and Miss Ffolliot [sic] Paget, the English actress. Politicians, clubmen and some prominent Wall street [sic] brokers were conspicuous”; “‘Black America’ Back: Nate Salisbury’s [sic] Show Delights an Audience in Madison Square Garden,” *New York Herald* (n.d.), *Black America* Scrapbook, MWEZ n.c. 4650, BRTD.

¹¹⁴ Sven Beckert, *Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 298-300. See also C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).

¹¹⁵ See Carico, “The Free Plantation,” chap. 2.

them of the absolute value of racial difference.¹¹⁶ Even so, audiences at *Black America* and other plantation shows were fascinated not simply by the spectacle of racial nostalgia but by the spectacle of racial labor: the unalienated yet unfree labor of the slave plantation, and the cultural labor of the spectacle itself. Here, in the flux of cultural transformation, the memory of the slave plantation had an ambivalent value as audiences both immersed themselves in a timeless pastoral and witnessed the unfolding of industrial progress.

This was not the first time the American public sought out southern comfort to ease its consumption of industrial progress. At the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, after witnessing the works of the enormous Corliss Engine, audiences could enjoy the hospitality of a “Southern Restaurant” and so reaffirm the nation’s connection to traditional values and even nature itself. Two decades later, visitors to the plantation spectacles enjoyed much the same welcome. At *Black America*’s Brooklyn show (at least), Salsbury provided audiences the opportunity to buy a “log cabin dinner” with “many Southern dishes on the bill,” supplementing their consumption of industrial spectacle with the consumption of food.¹¹⁷ Six years later, at Dundy’s “Old Plantation” show at the Buffalo Pan-Am Exhibition, patrons could take a bit of slavery home with them in a more durable form—by buying miniature cotton bales as souvenirs. In the Southern iterations of the “old plantation” concession, as Robert W. Rydell argues, such mementos offered “a not-so-subtle reminder of how blacks would fit into the economic structure of the Pan-American utopia forecast by the exposition’s directors.”¹¹⁸ In these concessions, following the vision of New South boosters and Northern industrialists, the Southern economy would be modernized with railroads, telegraphs, and factories, processing inexpensive cotton

¹¹⁶ See Michael O’Malley, *Face Value: The Entwined Histories of Money & Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 124-32.

¹¹⁷ “Black America on View,” *Brooklyn Eagle* (24 May 1895), 7. For the Southern Restaurant, a commission run by Atlanta businessman Edward Mercer, see Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 28.

¹¹⁸ Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair*, 147.

products harvested by inexpensive and disenfranchised African American labor. Like the concession-stand Southern cuisine, Dundy's miniature cotton bale used the form of a mass-produced commodity to match the New South vision of a timeless bond between the southland's produce and a subservient black folk. Yet for audiences in Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and Buffalo, the Southern fantasy for sale spoke not only to the role of the South, and of Southern black labor, in the modern American economy. They were designed to cultivate belief in what Jackson Lears calls the "fable of abundance"—the fantasy of modern industry harmonized with pastoral plenty, of the machine reconciled to the human, of progress without the conflicts history—even as the plantation spectacular unveiled the industrialization in America's cultural economy.¹¹⁹

Showmen presented their plantations as fantasies of abundance by tying the stage performance to the display of cotton. Cotton provided a visual motif which framed the theatrical production: cotton blossoms illustrated an early *South Before the War* program; a *Black America* songbook displayed its performers in stylized racial caricatures as blossoms on a cotton plant.¹²⁰ And it was displayed on stage in profusion: every spectacular included a cotton picking scene, while larger shows such as *The South Before the War* included a scene with cotton bales ready for shipping on a river wharf. Of course, in most plantation shows, much of the presence of cotton was achieved by scenic effect as "machine made" as their employees could appear to be. In the opening scene of *South Before the War*, "Uncle Eph's Dream," a green gauze curtain rises to reveal a cotton field on a painted backdrop.¹²¹ A reviewer of *Black America* noticed the

¹¹⁹ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance*; Klasson, *Civilizing the Machine*; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*; Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*. The possibility of reconciling history (modernity, capitalism, urbanization, industrialization) with historical innocence (pastoralism, agrarianism, manifest destiny) has been the key tension in American thought since at least the founding: see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*.

¹²⁰ Program for Whallen and Martell's *South Before the War* (5 Feb 1895), in South Before the War clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, NYPL-PA; *The Official Guide and Song Book of Black America* (c. 1898?), in Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays, John Hay Library, Brown University.

¹²¹ The stage direction reads: "Draw off Scene for picture to Cotton Field in -3-": "South Before the War" (typescript one of three; n/d.), 1, in box 1, folder 3, The South Before the War Company Papers.

“painted background representing a wharf with its piles of cotton bales, a steamboat tied up the broad expanse of the river, and a line of hills in the distance.”¹²² Even the ambitious Billy McClain would have relied on published lithographs for his backdrops to stage his cotton picking scene in *Before and After the War*.¹²³ Yet more than one reviewer waxed rhapsodic at the clichéd sights. At *South Before the War*, the “real cotton picking scene, showing the darkies picking cotton, while singing their melodies” was imitated exactly in *Slavery Days*, “in which an original and realistic cotton picking scene show[ed] a real cotton field as it was in slavery days, with the darkies in the field singing and picking the cotton” [ref].¹²⁴

Singing while picking cotton: cotton displaced the working of mass cultural economy onto a benign antebellum cotton economy, and presented the work of its professional African American performers as the organic output of lazy, imbecilic slaves. Of course, the idea was hardly new that black culture originated in the leisure afforded by a pre-industrial and even feudal way of life. This was standard minstrel fare as recently as the 1880s, and the plantation spectacles of the 1890s certainly followed in this vein, filling their showbills not only with novel cake walks and harmonized quartettes along with the “old but ever new” Stephen Foster standards. In a later concert of the *Black America* program conducted by McClain, just as in the original performance, the quartettes sang such Foster standards as “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia,” “Old Black Joe,” and “Kentucky Home.”¹²⁵ By framing these songs in relation to cotton picking, audiences could enjoy modern black cultural production as an expression of their joy in work—as imaginary slaves and real performers. The supposed “seldom...heard” melodies and movement of the black performers were believed, as one reviewer of *Black America* for the

¹²² “Southern Negro Life Depicted.”

¹²³ See McClain’s detailed instructions for costumes and scenery in “Before and After the War.”

¹²⁴ *New York Clipper* (23 April 1892), in *OOS*, 361.

¹²⁵ *Song Book of Black America*, 8.

New York Times put it, to indicate “the untrammelled outdoor life that [slaves] have lived.”¹²⁶ As one reviewer blithely said of the depiction of slavery in *South Before the War*, the slaves it depicted were “singing more industriously than picking cotton.”¹²⁷

However, by coupling the performance of nostalgic plantation melodies with the pantomimed labor of cotton picking, the plantation spectacle moved beyond tropes of pre-industrial leisure and yearnings for home. To make more real the antimodern fantasy, they committed themselves to replicating the cotton economy in ever more elaborate detail. Not only was the cotton field in *South Before the War* “true to nature,” said Martell’s publicity text, “actual cotton plants ‘jes from de Souf’ are plentifully placed upon the Stage.”¹²⁸ By claiming to have imported cotton from the South, Martell purchased his show’s authenticity in the contemporary Southern economy. Salsbury followed the same logic to the extreme by equipping his show with a working cotton gin and cotton press for the outdoor shows in Brooklyn and Boston. In the broadside for the Brooklyn show, the antique machinery of cotton manufacture was prominently described and said to “possess fascination for Northerners, as was shown by the crowd that lingered around and gazed all yesterday afternoon.”¹²⁹ It was, on one hand, a fascination for the obsolete. A critic in Boston delighted in the “primitive and cumbersome” cotton press and cotton gin and used the moment to remind readers of the march of technological progress: “Both of these machines are curiosities even to Southerners, for they were many years ago superseded by modern and improved machinery.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ “Wild Negro Chants and Dances.”

¹²⁷ Review of *South Before the War*, unidentified clipping, *South Before the War* clippings file, BRTC..

¹²⁸ Martell, précis for *South Before the War*, 2.

¹²⁹ “‘Black America’ is Open,” *Brooklyn Eagle* (26 May 1895), 4.

¹³⁰ “Southern Negro Life Depicted,” *Boston Evening Transcript* (July 18, 1895), clipping in “Black America” folder, Helen Armstead-Johnson Miscellaneous Theater Collection, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Yet on the other hand the fascination for the obsolete was also a fascination of progress. If the audience could not help but see the “modern and improved machinery” behind the mechanical relic, so too was the singing and cotton-picking slave shadowed by the African American professional. McClain attempted to cultivate this association between black actor and cotton machine explicitly. While Salsbury had overwritten Billy McClain’s narrative of black emancipation with a sociology of natural black inferiority, McClain later tried to train audience eyes on these currents of commercial exchange and industrial modernization which the plantation spectacle otherwise worked to hide. Three years after *Black America* itself closed, McClain attempted again to capitalize on its notoriety by launching a concert tour of plantation melodies and popular rags under its name. In the *Black America* songbook, which was marketed alongside the concert, McClain repeated the plantation spectacular’s strategy, impressing upon the reader the cotton press as a visible sign of the obsolete technology the Old South and the modern prowess of northern Management. Yet in this version, the story became even more elaborate:

This Cotton Press was secured last winter by the Management after a great deal of trouble and expense; it was brought from a Plantation about twelve miles south of Huntsville, Georgia, and was only secured by the Management after they had given to its owner a new machine of modern construction, and a promise to return the old one at the conclusion of the exhibition of “BLACK AMERICA.”¹³¹

The more genuine the pedigree of the old-fashioned technology in the performance, the more strident the show’s claims to modernity. Yet in narrating the origin of the cotton press, the songbook told a story not simply of the modernity of the north and the primitiveness of the south, but of a circuit of exchange by which the modern entertainment industry, in order to present an

¹³¹ *Song Book of Black America*, 1. Though the Hay Library catalogue incorrectly dates the document to 1893—two years before *Black America* was conceived—the copyright dates given to the popular songs within fall as late as 1898, three years after the show folded. It lists Wm. McClain as the conductor of “The Original Portion of the “Black America” Company in a New Concert,” a rare mention of McClain in publicity related to *Black America* (8).

image of an authentic pastoral plantation, was contributing to the modernization of the south. Just as tourism industry “sold Dixie” to Northern vacationers and thereby transformed Southern landscape with resorts and railroads, the plantation show traded for an old machine for display with a new machine for production.¹³²

Like the cotton plant and the cotton gin, the black cotton picker stood to be transformed into a cultural commodity by the plantation spectacular. No longer simply “collected” on a recruiting tour of the South, the black performers were, in a way, purchased along with the cotton press: “the Negroes who operate this machine were brought direct from the same plantation”—though it left unsaid whether they, too, had been returned home.¹³³ It was a canny omission. Early press for *Black America* had asked the same question of the fate of Salisbury’s black performers, believing they, like the Indians in the Wild West Show, would be civilized, “learn[] the advantage of independent prosperity...[and] also see the world”—but in the end return to their southern homes as agents of civilization.¹³⁴ But McClain’s version, intentionally or not, showed the modernizing effects of the cultural economy constructed by the plantation spectacular. Just as the new cotton press would produce cotton for the national economy, the machinery of mass amusement had uprooted the black laborer and transformed him into a modern and worldly performer.

While McClain meant to make his audiences see the modern black performer behind the “genuine Southern ducky,” his rival white showmen had a hard time disguising the mechanical tricks that produced the scene of the “old plantation.” A reviewer for the *New York Herald* explained to his readers the importance of set design for *Black America*’s “mammoth proportions” at Madison Square Gardens. To present its “series of animated scenes...[of] rural

¹³² For the Southern tourist industry, see Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*; Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*.

¹³³ *Song Book of Black America*, 1.

¹³⁴ “An American Manipulator.”

simplicity,” the show required not only 300 black performers but also “footlights and scenic effects and electric lights [which] play an important part in the work behind the scenes.”¹³⁵ By training his eyes on the lights and effects, the reviewer no doubt meant to add to Salsbury’s aura of command as a professional showman. But even in less mammoth plantation spectacles, audiences could not digest the nostalgia separately from the mechanics. “Jasmine blossoms were in profusion” during one performance of Field’s *Darkest America* in 1895, “and, to add to the effect, the house was perfumed with jasmine with mechanical contrivance. The trees moved as if in a gentle breeze, and the perfume was seemingly wafting from the trees as the curtain went up.”¹³⁶ By revealing the “mechanical contrivance” behind the wafting perfume and swaying trees, the reviewer certainly played to the technical interests of the theater professionals who read the *New York Clipper*. Yet it described a habit of seeing which would be expressed in press accounts of the plantation show throughout the decade. Unlike Dorothy in Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), reviewers and audiences of plantation shows could witness the machinery behind the illusion without disrupting the integrity of the spectacle. Like Baum, who was an actor and a showman in addition to a window trimmer and a novelist, the plantation showmen exemplified but unevenly executed a particularly modern style of magic: the power to make people believe the unbelievable, to turn artifice into attention, desire, and profit.¹³⁷

Audiences could believe in the showmen’s magic because of the work of the black actor. Though complaining of “the feeble pretense of a play [which] awakens some slight expectation of a continuance which never comes,” and the “more abundant than necessary” song and dance

¹³⁵ “‘Black America’ Back.”

¹³⁶ *New York Clipper* (July 13, 1895), in *OOS*, 334.

¹³⁷ Indeed, even after the Wizard is exposed as a “humbug” created with an elaborate set of theatrical illusions by a “little old man” (a circus ventriloquist from Omaha), not only is he forgiven by Dorothy and her companions, but the novel’s own edifice of illusion remains intact; the reality of Oz itself does not collapse. For a reading of Baum’s sympathetic identification with the Wizard, and Oz as a moral parable of consumerism, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, 253-55.

routines, one reviewer of *The South Before the War* nevertheless registered the audience's noisome approval for the "dramatic, acrobatic, musical, farcical, and, above all, African" entertainment.¹³⁸ While the "African" presence redeemed the incoherent narrative, the black performer could pose another problem for the audience's eye. When Field's *Darkest America* show toured Pottsville, Pennsylvania, in 1897, it not only brought to the coal-mining town the nostalgic representation of slavery days, but also exposed the quagmires of representation. In a striking review from the *Miners' Journal*, reprinted in the black newspaper *Indianapolis Freeman*, the local critic did not dwell on the cotton picking scene, the "glimpses of [the] natural state of old-time laborers of the South" in the show. Instead he emphasized his own experience of parsing illusion from reality. "While [the black actors] make up as perfect representations" of slaves, they are visibly "all too young to have had such an experience." The "illusion [was] broken," and the reviewer was incited to press deeper into the mystery of cultural production. He found the "art" of the black actor. "It is their art, therefore, that aids the natural powers of song and mimicry to reproduce scenes that must come....only through tradition." Art aids nature, tradition reproduces through mimicry—the peculiar natural technology of the black body helped to repair the illusion. For the African American readers of the *Freeman*, the account must have surely been reproduced for its praise of African American talent. For the Pennsylvania coal miners, the black actor might have represented something more ambiguous, both the artifice of the stage and the survival of human tradition. Of course, they did not question the authenticity of the "tradition" these actors were called upon to represent. As a representation of slavery, *Darkest*

¹³⁸ Review of *South Before the War* at Columbia Theatre, unidentified clipping (n.p., n.d.), in *The South Before the War* clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, NYPL-PA.

America “was perhaps the best presentation of scenes intended to be depicted...that could be exhibited.”¹³⁹

While the showmen appealed to audience’s desires to witness again the pre-industrial labor of the slave plantation, audiences themselves were struck by the ways the black actors worked amid the mass amusement industry. Writing in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin argued that the film actor’s social power lay in his perseverance of “humanity in the face of the apparatus.” For Benjamin, who was a particular fan of Charlie Chaplin, a film actor held the power to redeem the industrialization of society for the masses because he “take[s] revenge on their behalf...by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph.” As the African American actors faced the apparatus of the industrialized stage rather than the film camera, they achieved a paradoxical triumph, for their humanity was defined both by their art which marked their historical distance from slavery and by their “natural powers” which seemed to anchor them to the plantation forever. We can imagine how audiences might have had a difficult time resolving these contradictions. In *South Before the War* and *Black America* and the others, much money and effort had been expended to mystify the work of black actors and their claims on the nation’s history. What would audiences see? Looking to the black actor for identity and difference, they saw both “natural” bodies untouched by machines and artful Brains overcoming the illusion of the spectacle, both a nation humanized by slaves and a modern culture produced by African Americans. In this fragmented vision audiences strained to compose the industrial nation with and without black freedom.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ From *Miners’ Journal* (Pottsville, Pennsylvania), reprinted in “The Stage,” *Indianapolis Freeman* (Dec. 4, 1897), in *OOS*, 334-5.

¹⁴⁰ Likewise, witnessing the rise of Nazi Germany and Goebbels’s propaganda machine, Benjamin saw the redemptive potential of the film actor thwarted by “film capital” which reified the human presence into a celebrity: Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 31-33; quotation on p. 31; see also Benjamin, “Chaplin” and “Chaplin Revisited,” in *The Work of Art*, 333-337.

While written reviews often stressed the grandeur of the spectacle, photographic accounts of the plantation spectacular suggest that audiences experienced the show as a play between sensory alienation and national belonging mediated by the voice and sight of the African American performer.¹⁴¹ At *Black America*, the spectacle was so immense as to overwhelm the camera lens. In a series published in the *Illustrated American*, the photographer did not provide a panorama view of the show and instead offered a segmented view of individual scenes in close and medium shots (fig. 1.9). For large scenes such as the cake walk comprising dozens of couples (fig. 1.10), the labor activity at the cotton press (fig. 1.9b), and a massed devotion in front of John Brown's portrait, the photograph captured them at angles which obscured their relation to the whole of the show, whether in time or space. Yet however much the spectacle's visual fragmentation interrupted its production of a coherent national memory of slavery and emancipation, audiences could recompose them into a sensation of national renewal. In the *Illustrated American* article, the sensation of "revel and revelation" overwhelmed both writer and photographer's mediums of expression. For the writer, not only the appearance but also the voice of a "colored belle on the veranda receiving a follower" was among the "frequent sight[s] calculated to cure a sore or sordid prosaic vision." Sound itself had become absorbed by the visual sensation. Throughout the short review, the writer contrasted the images of massed groups of black actors and the "volume of sweetness" in their voices to modern ills of overcivilization: the silent devotion in front of John Brown's picture was "a wide contrast to the contemplative mind" (fig. 1.9c); the "troop of Amazons" staged an experience of "temporarily returning to

¹⁴¹ Cameras at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895 and the Buffalo Exposition in 1901 captured the "Old Plantation" only in close, isolated segments, focusing on groups of people and individual structures, such as slave cabins, rather than expansive or sequential shots of the entire pavilion. Photograph of Old Plantation at Atlanta depicts the side of a re-created slave hut with an advertisement for "Cake Walk" plastered on its side; from Division of Prints & Photographs, Library of Congress, reprinted in Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 88 (fig. 23). See photographs from Buffalo of "Old Plantation and Its Ballyhoo" (showing exterior shot of pavilion's entrance), "The Log Cabin in Which Abraham Lincoln Was Born," "Three 'Cullud Gemmen,'" "Typical Southern Negro Log Cabin," in Barry, *Snap Shots in the Midway*, 125-28.

something like ancestral nature” (fig. 1.9e). Though the spectacle of *Black America* “baffle[d] description,” it provided its audience, according to the writer, with a visual sense of a “living panorama of a people by the people and for the whole people.”¹⁴²

When *Black America* staged the “historical apotheosis” of emancipation with all the trappings of abolitionist iconography and mass amusement technology, more than one in the grandstands saw not simply the Union’s beneficence but the entry of African Americans into the nation’s history behind the voice of the black actor. Before “an immense frame worked by electricity,” about 20 by 10 feet, as Tarleton would recall, audiences witnessed the whole of the show’s cast of slaves sing abolitionist and jubilee songs before pictures of John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Generals Sherman and Grant, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Abraham Lincoln. In reviews from New York to Denver, press accounts not only broadcast the mass of black voices to its western audience, but also disseminated *Black America*’s solemn display of emancipationist remembrance:

It is impossible to listen to ‘America’ as those 500 negroes sing it before the picture of Abraham Lincoln and observe their appeals to his mute but benign countenance, and not feel for the time being that he made a country for them of that which had formerly been but an abiding place.¹⁴³

“For the time being.” Watching black actors playing slaves both witness and enact their own emancipation, audiences could imagine the greatest homecoming of all—black freedom and citizenship—as an achieved fact and as a passing moment. It was also a spectacle powered by a specially-built Edison generator which consumed two-and-a-half tons of coal per day; boats anchored in the harbor reported that its lights outshone the Statue of Liberty. *Black America*

¹⁴² “In the Gloaming,” *Illustrated American* (June 29, 1895), 826-27.

¹⁴³ “Wild Negro Chants and Dances,” from which large passages were republished without acknowledgement in “Salsbury’s Latest Schemes,” *Denver Evening Post* (29 May 1895).

concluded with a startling image of amassed black voices singing “America” before electrified portraits of the heroes of abolition. It “stir[red] the listeners almost to tears.”¹⁴⁴

For a moment in 1895 the amusement industry filled American eyes with tears by filling the American sensorium once again with the “old plantation.” But to do so it momentarily aligned the history of African American emancipation with the history of industrial progress. Twenty years before D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, *Black America* resolved the social fissures of its production into a fleeting and ambiguous image of freedom—in electric lights but out of time.

V. The Birth of a Nation

Like the antiquated cotton gin they displayed, the “old plantation” as a viable commercial enterprise would in turn become a relic on the landscape of ever larger and more modern attractions.¹⁴⁵ For visitors to the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, the spectacular sights of the “Old Plantation” show were already old hat, one among many diversions to be enjoyed on the midway. After moving through the Machinery Hall, Shoot the Chutes, the Foolish House, and the Magic Whirlpool, fair-goer and carpenter Edmund Philibert “led the way to the old plantation next,” where his group walked through the “typical log cabins” and enjoyed a thirty-minute show “of about twenty darkies singing, dancing, cakewalking, etc.” before leaving for home on the ten o’clock street car. Even when the fair was being dismantled, visitors, such as Philibert’s sister, would lose focus of the Old Plantation among a series of other attractions amid the “ruin and

¹⁴⁴ “Wild Negro Chants and Dances.” For Salsbury’s electrical generator, installed the previous year for the Wild West Show, costing about \$30,000, see Shiril Kasper, *Annie Oakley* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 135-38.

¹⁴⁵ For a probing examination of the figure of the ruin in American culture, not simply a residue of a bygone era but a material expression of the power of modern capital to develop and destroy the built environment, conjuring premonitions of a future after modernity, see Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

desolation”: “All there is left of the Pike is Blarney Castle, a part of Fair Japan, Helter Skelter, and the cabins in Old Plantation.”¹⁴⁶

The “Old Plantation” was likely seen by millions of visitors; with its sanitized version of slavery, it confirmed for them the “naturalness” of the rising American empire and the Jim Crow order of racial segregation then emerging, often violently, in the North and South. Yet the old plantation had become as easily consumed and as easily forgotten as a day at the park or a night “out.” Caught somewhere between a wistful fantasy and a commercial cliché, the memory of the slave plantation conjured in these shows was not only ephemeral but incomplete. Unable to address the war without bringing emancipation to light, the plantation spectacular and its derivatives sequestered the slave plantation in the nation’s historical memory even as they disseminated it nationwide. It would take a more powerful technology of reproduction, larger sums of capital, starker politics of race, and a more concentrated (if not ingenious) artistic vision to turn old plantation into a foundation for an epic of national rebirth.

At the very time the plantation spectacular was fading from the live stage, the stage tropes of the “old plantation” were being revived on the silver screen. As film historians have shown, the commercial and artistic innovators behind the rise of early cinema in the United States drew on theatrical amusements for both subject matter and models of visual spectacle. The old plantation of the minstrel tradition in particular remained a rich reservoir of powerful racial and national symbolism for early filmmakers. Yet the plantation spectacular resisted early film adaptation. Indeed Edwin S. Porter, a director working for Edison’s film production company, extracted value from the memory of the slave plantation by framing it in the narrative of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* stage shows. Born near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1870, Porter grew up amid the

¹⁴⁶ Edmund Philibert’s *World’s Fair Diary*, in Martha R. Clevenger, ed., “*Indescribably Grand*”: *Diaries and Letters from the 1904 World’s Fair* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1996), 99; Florence McCallion *World’s Fair Letters*, “*Indescribably Grand*,” 126.

trappings of industrialization (as a young man he worked as a telegraph operator and electrician) and the popular culture of race. At age six, according to one profile, Porter staged an impromptu performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, “essay[ing] the role of Simon Legree, [and] including his little country cousin to play the part of Uncle Tom.”¹⁴⁷ While film critics have praised Porter’s *Life of a Fireman* (1903) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) for their aesthetic and technical innovations, his *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) is considered “outmoded,” a mere replication of the stage versions that were hackneyed even at the time. Yet, marketed with the subtitle “Slavery Days,” Porter’s *Tom* can be seen as an experiment in representing the old plantation for a new amusement medium. Porter organized the racial performances of his plantation around the fissures between what Tom Gunning calls the cinema of attractions and the cinema of narrative: the genuine culture of the old plantation was performed by African American dancers; the sympathetic slave of the abolitionist melodrama by a white actor in blackface.¹⁴⁸ Though the film’s narrative did not account for the history of war and emancipation, the plantation spectacle and the abolitionist melodrama intermingled throughout—slaves danced and gamboled at their own auction—at once making a farce of African American humanity and linking the mass consumption of African American culture to the critique of slavery.

The plantation spectacle would not be cleaved from the history of emancipation until D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. Griffith decisively broke from the “old plantation” stage tradition by using as source material Thomas Dixon’s bestselling novel *The Clansmen* (1905), a valorization of the Ku Klux Klan that had itself been written to dislodge the abolitionist heritage

¹⁴⁷ “Ed. (Rex) Porter,” *The Moving Picture World* (22 April 1911), 878. For childhood performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and “racial innocence,” see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

¹⁴⁸ Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 38; Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 74.

of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from American popular culture. In this narrative, as with *Uncle Tom*, slavery is the nation's original sin and the "first seed of disunion" (fig. 1.11), but one which the white South redeemed by creating the harmonic racial order of the cotton plantation. The film introduces the antebellum plantation as "Love Valley," an Edenic setting where African American labor provides a background for an abolitionist's son to court a plantation owner's daughter (fig. 1.12). As in the plantation spectacular, *Birth of a Nation* showed the old plantation as a source of national wholeness and indulged in recreating the same scenes of African American song and dance (fig. 1.13). The abolition of slavery and the emancipation of slaves not only unleashes the chaos of black rule in Reconstruction but also disrupted the harmonic social bonds governed by white patriarchy: no longer a worker in the background, the black freedman looked to corrupt both the white republic and white women. As critic Michael Rogin argues, the essence of this narrative logic was distilled in a scene eventually censored by the National Board of Review for its heavy racial and sexual symbolism: the Klan's castration by sword of black freedman Gus to redeem his rape and murder of Southern belle Flora.¹⁴⁹ Even with the scene excised, the film makes clear the sweep of Dixon and Griffith's historical vision: the nation was reborn not by recuperating the old plantation but by castrating a figment of blackness of any agency in the political and sexual—let alone cultural—reproduction of the nation.

But *Birth of a Nation* premised the nation's rebirth not only on exterminating the black American but also in overturning *Black America*. In order to achieve his narrative of white supremacy he had to rebuild the plantation spectacular on a Hollywood lot, a whole village of "negroes' quarters of the Old South," as one reporter witnessed. Here Griffith commanded two hundred African American extras from "a chair on a little platform," where he tossed dimes at his

¹⁴⁹ Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*," *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 150-95.

performers to get them to dance. His direction, however, went beyond mere racist condescension. As he picked one extra out of the crowd to perform a “plantation” dance, he wielded his camera like a whip:

The aged negro dreams of the days of his youth. He dances better than the young men. He dances the old plantation steps. He pats the top of his bald head with the palm of his hand. He forgets he is working before a movie camera—he is back in the old days and these folk around him are his people....the spirit of youth dragged from him again by the genius of D. W. Griffith.¹⁵⁰

This behind-the-scenes moment is worth dwelling on. In Rogin’s interpretation, the film’s primal scene of black castration emerged from Griffith’s own anxieties of racial emasculation, encapsulated in a childhood memory in which Griffith’s father, a former Confederate soldier, “playacted” by dressing up in his old uniform and threatening to kill a devoted former slave with his army sword; Griffith both admired the signs of his father’s antebellum power and feared it, identifying ambivalently with his father’s power and the former slave’s impotence. As he filmed the old plantation, however, Griffith not only temporarily resolved his childhood memory but also resolved the contradictions in the plantation spectacular that had allowed African Americans to lay claim on American culture. (Griffith himself had been urged into show business by an African American actor who encouraged his talent.) In a reverse of Whallen and Martell’s *South Before the War*, *Birth of a Nation* begins with African American performance and replaces them with white actors in blackface. But rather than simply restoring the old technology of racial imitation, Griffith replaced the “Brains” of the black actor with his own mechanical “genius” that could draw out the memory of the plantation from the black body.¹⁵¹

Griffith overturned the abolitionist memory that had persisted in Porter’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* along with the emancipatory visions that emerged behind the scenes and on the stage of

¹⁵⁰ Selwyn Stanhope, “The World’s Master Picture Producer,” *The Photoplay Magazine* 7 (January 1915), 57-62; in Fred Silva, ed., *Focus on The Birth of a Nation* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971).

¹⁵¹ Rogin, “The Sword Became a Flashing Vision,” 173, 181-82.

the plantation spectaculars of the 1890s. Indeed he seemed to revisit his act of mastery over the audience itself, linking his narrative of national rebirth in his film to the incorporation of American culture by his camera. Not only would the “[moving] pictures...utterly eliminate from the regular theatre all the spectacular aspects of production,” Griffith prophesized following the *Birth of a Nation* premier in 1915. So too would audiences submit to Griffith and the new culture he represented, a culture organized by corporations and administered by experts: “You will merely be present at the making of history. All the work of writing, revising, collating, and reproducing will have been carefully attended to by a corps of recognized experts, and you will have received a vivid and complete expression.”¹⁵²

For the principals of the plantation spectaculars of the 1890s, the old plantation had become a less inviting field for profit and prestige; they plotted different escapes. Nate Salsbury died a paragon of show business success in 1902, though his success with the Wild West far outshone *Black America*.¹⁵³ Whallen and Martell were likewise unsentimental about the worth of the old plantation but had learned from it a lesson in control. The *South Before the War* had made Whallen and Martell rich men and powerful brokers in the new mass amusement industry. As stockholders and boardmembers of the Empire Circuit Company, they were leaders among the movement that centralized and standardized the production of public amusement, determining from their head offices which “variety” acts would be delivered to the millions around the country. Their earlier appropriation of blackface plantation material had served its purpose, and the teary paeans to the idyllic “Old South” were discarded. As early as 1897 Martell resorted to a familiar gimmick that betrayed the plantation spectacular’s waning appeal. “The audience,” one

¹⁵² “Some Prophecies: Film and Theatre, Screenwriting, Education,” from D. W. Griffith, “Five Dollar ‘Movies’ Prophesied,” *The Editor* (April 24, 1915), 407-10; in Harry M. Geduld, ed., *Focus on D. W. Griffith* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 34-35.

¹⁵³ “Death of Nate Salsbury,” *New York Times* (Dec. 25, 1902), 7.

Chicago reviewer observed, was “prevented from losing interest by a series of animated pictures cast by a cinematographe.” The contrast between the old plantation and the new amusement machinery was pronounced. For a performance at the Burbank Theater in Los Angeles on New Year’s Day, 1899, the antics of Uncle Eph were preceded by a screening of “The Passion Play,” a short film by the Animated Picture Machine Company. We can only speculate what audiences understood by the juxtaposition between the screened Christian melodrama and the minstrel slapstick of Uncle Eph’s homecoming. Perhaps they sensed a veiled return of Uncle Tom’s transcendent martyrdom, which *The South Before the War* had otherwise tried to erase. But for the showmen there was no contradiction. Their plantation had become less valuable as a vehicle for cultural modernization than the company’s favored mode of transportation: the Sunset Limited railroad line—“the fastest train on earth.”¹⁵⁴

Billy McClain never fully realized his corporatist vision of racial progress, and never fully escaped from the old plantation. He joined a long tradition of African American entertainers in finding greater success and comfort overseas, from Australia, where he managed a boxer, to France, where he lived and performed comedy from 1905 to 1913. When he moved to Hollywood in 1931 he found himself in a film industry in which the only roles available to black talent were as slaves; he had a modest career playing bit parts as servants, footmen, butlers, and whipped slaves until his death in 1950. Unlike in *Black America* and *Before and After the War*, and unlike the plantation shows and songs he continued to hawk stateside throughout the 1900s, McClain had no power to turn the story of slavery into the story of emancipation. Yet, writing from Paris in 1905, McClain could still locate the cause of his ire not in an increasingly racist American society but in the monopoly power of the incorporating amusement industry: “it is the

¹⁵⁴ “Fall Play Season Open,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Aug. 9, 1897), 10; Program for Martell’s *South Before the War*, Burbank Theater, LA (Jan. 1, 1899), in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 167-8.

few blood suckers in the syndicate that control American theatrical enterprises who say, ‘We will shut the Negro out.’” Indeed, a decade before Griffith’s triumph, he maintained a faith that this same industry could secure equity for the race, if not redeem the nation. He told the African American readers of the *Indianapolis Freeman* in a hopeful voice strained by years of thwarted ambition: “But the time has come when the Negro must wake up and march on.”¹⁵⁵

The plantation spectacular was the setting for and the product of a crucial turning point in the material modes of the nation’s cultural reproduction: when minstrelsy was supplanted by a new industrial amusement economy, and when white performers were supplanted by African Americans. For McClain and his generation of African American cultural workers and entrepreneurs, the representational dilemma of whether to ground their art in the memory of slavery was thus compounded and shaped by the material and commercial problem of selling slavery in the vicissitudes of cultural transformation: how to create and sustain the conditions of freedom in a marketplace that constructed value out of the memory of racial bondage?

¹⁵⁵ Billy McClain, Letter from Paris, *Indianapolis Freeman* (Oct. 27, 1905), in Sampson, *Ghost Walks*, 351.

2.

MARKETING SLAVERY

Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs...the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)¹

It is the story that people pay for, not the advertisement. It is the story that gives interest and personality...and the story of a commodity is the soul of its advertisement.

—Herbert N. Casson, *Ads and Sales* (1911)²

My soul wants something that's new, that's new...

— Spiritual³

When asked by his editor to pick one of the covers “stamped up for the book,” the author of *The Souls of Black Folk* chose with an eye for color: “I greatly prefer the black—it suits the title best” (fig. 2.1).⁴ The choice of book cover was a small but crucial detail for editor and author alike. As they corresponded between Chicago’s A. C. McClurg & Co. and Atlanta University, Francis G. Browne and W. E. B. Du Bois enjoyed a cordial and productive collaboration. Du Bois projected onto all aspects of his book an image of himself that was also an image of the race. Just as at the head of each chapter he paired a spiritual with a verse of English poetry, and just as he dressed for his authorial photograph in all the finery of a Victorian

¹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), viii.

² Herbert N. Casson, *Ads and Sales: A Study of Advertising and Selling from the Standpoint of the New Principles of Scientific Management* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1911), 74.

³ “My Soul Wants Something That’s New,” music and text excerpted in Du Bois, *Souls*, 258.

⁴ Francis G. Browne to W. E. B. Du Bois, Feb. 27, 1903, and Du Bois to Browne, n.d., W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts–Amherst Libraries. During the course of research for this essay, I relied on the Du Bois Papers as they were available on microfilm and, eventually, online at <http://credo.library.umass.edu/>. Further references to this collection will be to the online version and abbreviated DBP-UM.

gentleman, so he “suited” his book with a cover at once austere and solidly black.⁵ By the same motion, however, Du Bois directed a subtler but no less meaningful transformation: he put his mark on *The Souls of Black Folk*—and the souls of black folk—as it took on a material presence in the literary marketplace.

Perhaps not since abolitionist Gerrit Smith gave Frederick Douglass free reign to redesign the *North Star* into *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* had an African American author been so free to express his self-image in the white-controlled medium of print. “The paper must be clean, white, and strong,” Douglass wrote to Smith in 1851, betraying a chromatic sensibility that anticipated Du Bois’s. “The ink pure, black, and glossy.”⁶ A half century later, in his collection of “essays and sketches”—the text he and Browne modestly called the “little book”—Du Bois renewed that link between graphic design and a boldly emancipationist vision of American history.⁷ Yet the conditions of reproducing that vision had changed dramatically. Along with other sectors of the turn-of-the-century cultural economy, bookmaking and bookselling were undergoing rapid if uneven industrialization and incorporation. It was not enough for the image of the race to be represented in pure, black, and glossy ink; the black soul had to maintain its immaterial value through its many transactions across the apparatus of literary reproduction—from pen to typewriter to press, from the “dark past” to a reader’s hands. As his fellow African American authors had discovered when they attempted to redeem the value of plantation folklore in the

⁵ For the politics of racial self-presentation in this era, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black,” *Representations* 24 (Autumn 1988): 129-55; for Du Bois’s work in constructing his public image as an image of the race in photography and print, see Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), epilogue.

⁶ Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, June 4, 1851; quoted in John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 166. For Douglass’s chromatic sense and his radical politics of racial expression, see *ibid.*, 166-68.

⁷ For Du Bois and the historical memory of slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 251-54; Blight, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory,” in Robert O’Meally and Geneviève Fabre, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 45-75.

literary market, the aesthetic problem of representing the black soul in literary narrative was inseparable from the material problem of navigating the hazards of the mass cultural economy.⁸

Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk* enter the story of selling slavery as an unequivocal voice of protest. As numerous biographers, scholars, and critics have shown, Du Bois lived and wrote about an African American experience that sharply contrasted the racist accounts then prevailing from the lowest popular culture to the highest intellectual circles. Born to a humble home in rural Massachusetts in 1868, by the turn of the century Du Bois had become one of the leading African American intellectuals in the United States. He earned a stellar education as a historian and sociologist at Fisk University, Harvard, and the University of Berlin. At Harvard he was the first African American Ph.D. student and was awarded a doctorate for his dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896). By 1899, he had completed an intensive sociological study of an emergent black urban community, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), and became a professor of sociology at Atlanta University where he embarked on an ambitious program of research on contemporary social and economic conditions of the Southern “black belt.” It was there, between 1897 and 1903, that he wrote the essays that would comprise the capstone of his early career: *The Souls of Black Folk*. The book has commanded attention from critics and scholars not only as a landmark in American letters but also as a pointed rebuke to the myth of the old plantation and the racist politics it enabled. In counterpoint, Du Bois honed what David Blight describes as his “tragic vision of American history,” a vision that he distilled in the Sorrow Songs, the African American vernacular culture wrought by the historical experience of

⁸ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

slavery, at once an articulation of black humanity and an aesthetic foundation for his own literary voice.⁹

In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois grounded his historical memory of slavery and his literary recovery of the Sorrow Song in a critical conception of slavery's political economy. In effect dismantling the system of differences that made up the old plantation myth, and in anticipation of his later claim in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) that the enslaved were "the founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world," Du Bois argued that slavery was a vexed scene of American progress.¹⁰ The slave plantation and the slave trade were essential components to the material progress of the United States—a relationship between modernity and racial exploitation that did not cease with emancipation. Du Bois sought to redeem this relationship by granting the enslaved and their progeny powerful historic and moral claim to the nation's wealth, civil society, and polity. Thus he offered the "Sorrow Song" not only as a more authentic replacement of blackface minstrelsy and other "degraded" forms of popular amusement; he cast it as a gift that would generate a grander spiritual renewal of the nation. For as the "Sorrow Song" would enrich the spirit of a nation beset by the crude materialism of commerce, so would its singers be recognized and reenfranchised as citizens, workers, and human souls, enlarging the concept of American progress to include the ideals of slave emancipation. In effect he deconstructed the old plantation myth in order to rescue the point of interracial recognition buried and distorted within it.

⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 251. See also Brad Evans, *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chap. 5; Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), chap. 1; Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 5; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 57-68.

¹⁰ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935; New York: Free Press, 1992), 15.

Yet to broadcast the Sorrow Song and the symbolic commerce it crystallized Du Bois would have to sell it. The story in *The Souls of Black Folk* is inseparable from its story as a commodity, as Du Bois broached the problem of representing slavery in literature and in history among the social relations of the literary marketplace and in the material form of a book. How could a black soul be alienated as matter without being debased as an object in turn? How could an aestheticized commodity be sold as a political object, a shard of black life?

This chapter argues that Du Bois wove his critical memory of slavery into the processes of the literary marketplace—a weaving that marked his own thinking about race and modern consumerism. It does so in five parts: in his conception of the “Sorrow Songs” as a transformative currency; in the trope of spiritual transubstantiation—or life and death—explored in the book’s narrative of bondage and emancipation; in the marketing and design of the book object as negotiated through editorial correspondence; in his proposal for an illustrated “Negro Journal” that would mediate between the “consciousness” of black souls and that of the “modern world”; and in his contemplation about the role of consumerism as a site for enlarging the “soul-life” of the emancipated race. Across these fields of memory, production, marketing, and consumption, Du Bois attempted to preserve the value of the black soul in aesthetic and commercial forms. Like other authors and artists facing an increasingly industrialized working environment, Du Bois would indeed seek enchant the banal sensorium of commerce with the lyric and spirit of a more authentic spirit.¹¹ The literary-material-commodity book form that resulted can be seen as a kind of provisional assemblage.¹² As he ventured to sell slavery, then,

¹¹ For complementary readings in which literature registers the material environment and shapes a sense of things, see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

¹² The idea of Du Bois as a literary artist of assemblage is suggested in Kenneth W. Warren, “Seeing Voices: Terry Adkins’s *Darkwater Record*,” in Hamza Walker and Karen Reimer, eds., *Black Is, Black Ain’t* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2013), 57.

Du Bois not only confronted the same hazards as showman Billy McClain, but engaged with the problem of matter in African American life at the dawn of the machine age.

I. Currency

In the final pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*, after immersing the reader in the consciousness and environs of African Americans from slavery to the present, Du Bois now showed the moral economy in which the soul of the reader and the souls of black folk had come to meet. The currency that mediated this moral economy was the Sorrow Song. Through the Sorrow Song he congealed in the book now in the reader's hands a cultural memory of the enslaved. Indeed Du Bois described his book as a placeholder for the black soul itself: "Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs...the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past." The music of the black slave had been transcribed into musical notation and was now "printed" in this book; it had been given weight, substance, and value. In this regard *The Souls of Black Folk* was analogous to Fisk University's Jubilee Hall. Beginning in 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the Sorrow Songs across the United States and Europe, translating abolitionist Lucy McKim's transcriptions of slave spirituals into stirring choral performances for a paying white public. After seven years, they "brought back a hundred and fifty thousand dollars" to build the hall. The Fisk Singers had turned the music of the black soul into choral performance, that performance into money, and that money into red bricks. In the end the Hall "seemed ever made of the songs themselves," just as its "bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil" of the freed people who built it.¹³

How did the Sorrow Songs turn memory into money? What moral structure did Du Bois mean to build with them now? Although scholars have approached the Sorrow Songs as a

¹³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 253, 251.

cultural form, for Du Bois they were a medium that bridged the cultural and the economic, the spiritual and the material. This duality not only structured Du Bois's account of the redemptive value of the memory of slavery, but also reflected the tensions in his own approach to the cultural marketplace. On the one hand, Du Bois saw in the Sorrow Song a deep reference to the ancestral tradition passed down from his "grandmother's grandmother," an African slave stolen to Dutch New York, a racial memory that still lived in "the hearts of the Negro people." On the other hand, the Sorrow Song was different from the memory it bore; it was a representation that circulated publically. It is thus unsurprising that Du Bois would describe the moral meaning of the memory of the enslaved as if it were currency. The Sorrow Song was the voice in which "the slave spoke to the world"; yet it depended on a "wide popular currency" to reproduce its message in the world.¹⁴ The Sorrow Songs were a two-sided coin: they carried the original value of the black soul who first sang them; and they were a sign of that value.

Here and throughout *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois was highly dubious of the virtue of economic materialism that money represented. As a currency, the Sorrow Songs could be redeemed for spiritual rewards, yet run the risk the risk of its original value being corrupted in commercial exchange. Yet Du Bois differentiated the Sorrow Songs from the other currencies circulating through *The Souls of Black Folk*. While the "wide currency" of Booker T. Washington's "theories" reflected an impoverished concept of economic progress, and while cotton, "the currency of the Black Belt," actually was impoverishing sharecroppers in the Deep South, the currency of the Sorrow Songs could enrich Americans and African Americans alike.¹⁵ Indeed the Sorrow Songs were money of the soul, juxtaposed to the material tender of the American economy: the "wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave" was an "oasis" that would

¹⁴ Du Bois, *Souls*, 257, 255.

¹⁵ Du Bois, *Souls*, 45, 148.

rejuvenate the nation's "dusty desert of dollars and smartness."¹⁶ Just as the Sorrow Song would redeem the nation's "vulgar" culture of monetary gain, so would its exchange enable the "soul of the black slave" to live on in the "great temple builded of the[m]" at Fisk. But, like Washington's theories, cotton, and dollars, the value of Sorrow Songs could erode through careless or unethical handling. Over time and through the hands of unscrupulous traders—namely the "caricature[s] on the 'minstrel' stage"—"their memory died away."¹⁷

Du Bois did not seek to insulate the Sorrow Song entirely from the contingencies of exchange. If the Sorrow Songs delivered "the articulate message of the slave to the world," during the forty years after Emancipation, that message had indeed become "naturally veiled and half articulate." But transmission had also been salutatory. From their origins in Africa, Du Bois explained in a remarkable passage, black folksongs evolved from a "primitive" type to more complex forms during the historical experience of slavery, transforming from African to Afro-American and then to the "blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land." This blending had also generated less welcome excess. "Side by side" the process of blending emerged a doppelganger: the "debasements and imitations" in which Du Bois included the stuff of popular vaudeville—minstrel and "coon" songs—as well as the new "gospel" music of the black urban church. Here Du Bois's dismissal of gospel music followed his cultural politics that elevated an original racial value over the corrupt world of urban amusement; indeed his language of blending and debasement seemed to explain cultural history by biological notions of racial transfusion through blood that fueled the nightmares of white supremacists. But for Du Bois, the difference between good blending and bad debasement could be discerned by the ethical

¹⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, 11. Whereas in 1903 Du Bois asked America to replace "her vulgar music with the soul of the Sorrow Songs" (12) in 1897 he asked to replace "her Annie Rooney with Steal Away" ("The Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic Monthly* [August 1897], 197).

¹⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, 251.

relationship between the parties of the transaction. Degradation marked “a mass of music in which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the real Negro melodies.” Blended music, however, was an exchange where black and white could find each other. While minstrel and gospel songs seemed to imitate the Sorrow Songs without cultural or commercial payoff for the black originator, the plantation melodies of Stephen Foster, made popular in the burgeoning sheet music market of the late 1840s, were not only “the songs of white America [that had] been distinctively influenced by the slave songs” but also carried with them an empathetic and ethical relationship to the black soul.¹⁸

Du Bois sought to distinguish the currency of the Sorrow Song from an alienable commodity and from money; but he did not. Instead he preserved the currency of the Sorrow Song in the form of a gift, its exchange shaped by a moral economy of social obligation. If Jubilee Hall was built by the profits earned from the Sorrow Songs, so had the nation itself been built by the gifts of black souls. The gift of “story and song” joined the gifts of labor and of spirit to furnish Americans with a civilization. “Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,” Du Bois declared. “Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would American have been American without her Negro people?”¹⁹ The rush of questions linked the freely given gift of story and song to a history of moral debt owed by the nation to African Americans. Here Du Bois recapitulated the ethical argument that he had been steadily building throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*. The Sorrow Songs earned their redemptive value in a wider history that began in slavery and was left unfinished with the nation’s abandonment of black freedom; the cultural memory of the enslaved contained a deeper historical memory of slavery in which the fate of white and black Americans had become

¹⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, 253, 256-57.

¹⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 253.

inextricably bound. In an earlier chapter on the era of emancipation, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” he distilled this historical memory in an image of master and slave, a “gray-haired gentleman” and “a form dark and mother-like” whom he had violated and who had raised his “sons and daughters” and “borne” his own “tawny man-child”:

These were the saddest sights of that woful day [*sic*]; and no man clasped the hands of these two passing figures of the present-past; but, hating, they went to their long home, and, hating, their children’s children live to-day.²⁰

If the Sorrow Song completed the “ill-harmonized and unmelodious land” with “soft, stirring melody,” so would the accompanying acknowledgement of the moral debt complete the unfinished work of freedom that had doomed white and black Americans to live in “the present-past.” By recognizing African Americans as “co-workers in the Kingdom of Culture”—as well as fellow citizens and productive laborers—the nation could redeem its own promises of freedom.²¹ “If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good,” Du Bois prophesized, “America shall rend the Veil [between the races] and the prisoned shall go free.”²²

How to compel white Americans to honor their debt, however, remained unsaid. Du Bois was not one to leave the work of black emancipation to divine providence, let alone the good nature of consumers. In formulating the currency of the Sorrow Songs as a gift, Du Bois attempted not only to resolve its paradox but also make it productive. Valuable as cultural currency, and socially powerful as a gift, the Sorrow Songs might be seen to have been handled by Du Bois as a deconstructed memory: it was always already in *différance* to the original presence of the soul of the black slave; this difference not only allowed that original soul to circulate beyond time and space but also was shaped by power to exploit or redeem the value of

²⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, 29-30. The moral meaning of this passage as an “alternative vision” in the culture of national reunion is eloquently argued in Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 254.

²¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 262.

²² Du Bois, *Souls*, 263.

its reference. Characteristically, for philosopher Jacques Derrida, a true “gift” is a paradox for its receipt requires the “radical forgetting” of the memory of exchange in which it originated and social obligation it compelled.²³ But Du Bois wanted to remind Americans of their obligations, ethical and economic, to the black folk who gave them the gift of culture. The ideal model of exchange was the moment when white abolitionists met the freed people of the Sea Islands and transcribed their songs, “face to face and heart to heart.”²⁴

Thus the Sorrow Song also consummated Du Bois’s own labor in shaping a black soul into literary form. How could contemporary Americans meet their black brethren “face to face and heart to heart,” if not in the crucible of emancipation but in the pages of a book? The figure of the redemptive black soul had never been far from the representations of the enslaved in the cultural marketplace. In a review of a Hyers Sisters’ plantation show in Chicago, 1889, for instance, one white theater critic could imagine that the reappropriation of minstrel caricature still carried its original value: “There is a weird witchery about these southern songs, which...tell a story of the soul.”²⁵ Whereas the Hyers Sisters and their protégé Billy McClain had sought to preserve and reproduce the value of the slave song for mass audiences, amusement industrialists such as Whallen & Martell and Nate Salsbury wielded their power to exploit the tropes of “old plantation”—including Foster melodies—while attempting to diminish the value of their black performers. (If Du Bois had been following the course of the “plant shows” across the urban northeast, it might have provided him the very model of “degradation.”) Du Bois, however, gave his literary representation of the black soul over the course of several essays and sketches written

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); for a practical reading of Derrida’s text, see Tom McCarthy, *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 122-25, 145-46. Both Derrida and McCarthy draw extensively from Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. D. W. Halls (1950; trans. London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁴ Du Bois, *Souls*, 253, 254, 251.

²⁵ Review of Hyers Sisters, *Chicago Inter-Ocean* (March 21, 1889), quoted in Harry T. Sampson, *The Ghost Walks: A Chronological History of Blacks in Show Business, 1865-1910* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1988), 58.

for both popular magazines and scholarly journals. Beginning with “The Strivings of the Negro People” in 1897, Du Bois wrote of the black soul in a marketplace that traded in its own currency of blackness.

II. Exchanges

In June 1897 Du Bois pitched a story to Walter Hines Page at the *Atlantic Monthly* about the “spiritual and intellectual aspects” of African American life since slavery. In his reply, Page encouraged Du Bois to develop his “new” point of view, but feared that the subject was “threadbare.” He advised Du Bois to stick to “concrete material” by using “life-stories and human experiences” to illuminate how the race was “lift[ed] from the old darkness of slavery into the ambitious life of the American citizenship.” As Page saw it, the passage from slavery to freedom was a passage from darkness to illumination that would be best represented—and more likely to be published—in a concrete mode. Page was in love with the “concrete”: “concrete shape,” “concrete forms,” “concrete material”—“this is matter for literature.” He referred Du Bois to Booker T. Washington as a source for this material, and envisioned a series called “Stories from Tuskegee.”²⁶

Du Bois later credited Page for inviting him to a “simple talk ... [that] meant a great deal to me” in the *Atlantic* offices that summer.²⁷ Page was indeed a crucial supporter in Du Bois’s early literary career. The Southern expat published Du Bois’s essay, “The Strivings of the Negro People” in the August issue, and then five more in *The Atlantic* and *World’s Work* between 1899 and 1902. Yet however supportive he was of Du Bois, Page constricted the “concrete” of African

²⁶ Walter Hines Page to William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, 24 June 1897, no. 38, Walter Hines Page Papers, Letters from various correspondence, American period (MS Am 1090), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²⁷ Though Du Bois would later decline to publish with Doubleday, Page & Co. for its association with Thomas Dixon’s racist novels, he maintained a fond memory of Page himself. Du Bois to Burton J. Hendrick, 2 Jan. 1925, DBP-UM.

American cultural and historical memory to a bifurcated view of nostalgia and progress.²⁸ Indeed his proposal of “Stories of Tuskegee” anticipated his collaboration with Tuskegee’s own Wizard. After leaving the *Atlantic* to take a partnership with book publisher Doubleday, Page & Co., Page oversaw the editing and publication of Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901), a narrative of racial progress keyed to the work ethic of an exemplary individual. Yet for Page, as for many Northern and Southern liberals, the advocacy of Washington’s brand of racial uplift did not contradict the pleasure of plantation folklore; they were two sides of a single coin. In an introduction added to the 1906 edition of *Up from Slavery*, Page declared that among the contemporary “literature of the Negro in America,” the best were “‘Uncle Remus’ and ‘Up from Slavery’”: “One has all the best of the past, the other foreshadows a better future.”²⁹

For Page the memory of slavery was both a “darkness” to be overcome and a source of the “best” literature. That Page could seamlessly conflate such opposites as complements bespoke deeper ideological affinity between their positions. While Washington would have bristled at the comparison, for Page *Uncle Remus* and the Tuskegee Institute were complementary nodes in a frictionless narrative of racial progress: the faithful slave and the plantation pastoral giving way to the hardworking, thrifty, and contentedly segregated freedman in a modern South free of political conflict over civil rights. In Page’s eyes, moreover, Uncle Remus and *Up from Slavery* could correspond as literary products. Just as Harris mined his brain for plantation folklore, Washington supplied the concrete narrative of linear uplift that Page had encouraged Du Bois to write. Under Page’s editorial direction, as Carla Willard argues,

²⁸ Coincidentally, just after Du Bois’s essay went to print, Page was turning down an article about “the injustices done to the negro by the discrimination of labor unions against him.” Though the writer argued that “in those industries at least where the skill of one race is comparable to the skill of the other, there is less excuse for such discrimination you speak of,” Page could not see any “concrete instances.” Page to John S. Durham, Esq., Sept. 8, 1897, and Sept. 13, 1897, nos. 39 and 40, WHPP.

²⁹ Walter H. Page, Introduction to Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906), xx.

Washington crafted his prose to suit the marketing needs of a publishing industry that prized efficient, brief, and direct expression. Washington (or his ghostwriter) expertly “timed” his narrative of racial uplift to the standards of commercial writing. At first serialized in *The Outlook* and then published as a book in short chapters, *Up from Slavery* ordered the experience of freedom into sequential parts just as *Uncle Remus* packaged slavery as easily-digestible bric-a-brac.³⁰

In 1897 Du Bois was only beginning to stake an independent claim from Washington’s newfound yet considerable influence over black politics—and a literary style distinct from Page’s reductive notion of the “concrete.” Yet even at this moment Du Bois was developing a literary project distant from the “Stories of Tuskegee.” In “The Strivings of the Negro People,” published in the *Atlantic* that August and destined to become the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois turned Page’s dictum on its head. Rather than show concrete life experience, he described the “strange experience” of “being a problem.” Instead of “illuminating” the passage from slavery to citizenship, Du Bois illuminated the “peculiar sensation” of “double-consciousness” that vexed the nominally free but ostracized African American citizen. The concreteness of black life was loosened by a “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.” Interrupting the striving of the black soul was the concrete manifestation of racism: “the terrors of the Ku-Klux Klan,” “the disorganization of industry,” and everyday “ridicule and systematic humiliation.” Du Bois did not so much refuse Page’s terms as reverse them. Whereas

³⁰ Carla Willard, “Timing Impossible Subjects: The Marketing Style of Booker T. Washington,” *American Quarterly* 53.4 (December 2001): 624-69. Willard’s account deepens Baker’s argument that Washington’s prose was a modernist “mastery of form”; see Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. For other explorations of *Up from Slavery* as a text of Washington’s strategic self-presentation, or the open play of signification, see Donald B. Gibson, “Strategies and Revisions of Self-Representation in Booker T. Washington’s Autobiographies,” *American Quarterly* 45.3 (Sept. 1993): 370-393; and Susanna Ashton, “Entitles: Booker T. Washington’s Signs of Play,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 39.2 (Spring 2007): 1-23.

Page sought to evaluate black life by how concretely its progress could be represented, Du Bois made the value of black life “a stern concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic.”³¹

In “Strivings,” Du Bois delivered the “spiritual and intellectual aspects” of black experience not by the “tape” of linear progress but from the inner sensations of the soul. Yet it was a soul that sought commerce with the wider world. The force of Du Bois’s writing in the period of *The Souls of Black Folk* was directed precisely at illuminating the creation and degradation of the black soul through exchange between its immaterial spirit and the material world. “Strivings” was framed by two moments of such exchange. “In a wee wooden school house,” Du Bois recalled of his first experience being “shut out” of the wider world, “something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card— . . .peremptorily, with a glance.” By the end of the essay, this exchange of visiting cards expanded to a broader commerce between the black soul and the “coarse, cruel” American one. Just as Du Bois offered a card to the tall newcomer, the black soul offered the “wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave” as a gift that would redeem materialist America.³²

“Strivings” would not only take place as the keynote in *The Souls of Black Folk*; it framed a prodigious period of writing. Scholars have explained Du Bois’s famous turn towards literature as a turn away from strictly empirical forms of sociology and historiography and towards aesthetics; and accordingly they have read *The Souls of Black Folk* as if Du Bois conceived his text as a voicing of an essential black soul coherent from its inception. But neither

³¹ Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 80.478 (August 1897), 194, 198. For a gloss on the publication of “Strivings,” though without attention to Page, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 198-200. For “Strivings” as an evocation of the everyday material relations that sustain racist ideology, see Holt, “Marking.”

³² Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” 194, 197.

Du Bois's conception of race nor of his book were so clear cut. As Tom Holt argues, Du Bois did not simply conceive of race as an essence of biological inheritance or cultural ideal; he uniquely argued that a racial spirit arose from and took shape in the contingencies of historical experience, from the crucible of the Middle Passage to the trials of freedom.³³ The complexities in his thinking about race redoubled in his work of writing the black soul into history.

In 1900, speaking at the third meeting of the American Negro Academy, Du Bois linked the "Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind" to the ability of these races to represent their experience in literature. For Du Bois, literature was not simply the representation of life but the product of life: "real literature" came from "efficient work" in conditions of "sweat and poverty" not unlike that of a virtuous preacher or ploughman. Rather than "writ[e] careless essays and catchy addresses" that would amount to "a heap of trash," Du Bois instructed his audience of African American scholars to put their "time...on a serious thorough book" in order to "give[] the world something of permanent value." To stir his audience, and perhaps himself, to action, he named the vanguard behind the "rise of a real literature among us": Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt, Booker T. Washington, and James D. Corrothers.³⁴ However, Du Bois would depart from these authors in form and style.³⁵ Neither a recitation of plantation folklore nor an uplifting autobiography, Du Bois took up the work of producing "real literature" in a somewhat inefficient manner. In essays written for the highbrow *Atlantic Monthly*, the

³³ I take this point from Thomas C. Holt, "W.E.B. DuBois's Archaeology of Race: Re-Reading 'The Conservation of Races,'" in Michael Katz and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and the City: The Philadelphia Negro and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998): 61-76.

³⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind," *Church Review* (Philadelphia) 17 (October 1900): 95-110; in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, 3 vols. (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1982): 1:82, 81.

³⁵ Though Washington paid heed to the value of the plantation songs in the opening chapter of *Up from Slavery*, a value he strikingly defined not as an object of consumption by whites but as an expression for worldly freedom by slaves: "True, they had sung those same verses before, but they had been careful to explain [to their masters] that the 'freedom' in these songs referred to the next world....Now they gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the 'freedom' in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world." Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (1901; New York: Signet, 2000),13.

illustrated *World's Work* (both edited by Page), as well as scholarly journal of the American Political Science Association, Du Bois took up the experience of the black soul piecemeal, writing in focused “sketches” on a range of historical periods and themes. The conditions of writing were, for Du Bois, as fragmented and imperiled as the black soul he wrote about in “Strivings.” Indeed he himself would see the two problems merge in one moment of danger.

The question of permanent value was high on Du Bois’s mind. A year before his address to the Negro Academy, and just newly a professor of sociology at Atlanta University, Du Bois saw black life itself rendered into a heap of trash when Sam Hose was lynched in nearby Dougherty County. Du Bois did not know Hose, but he marks the episode as a crucial turning point in his 1940 autobiography. When he learned that the tenant farmer had murdered his landlord and employer’s wife in a dispute over wages, he sought to prevent the inevitable by appealing to the public with “careful and reasoned statement.” The appeal to reason not only came too late but also, Du Bois remembered, would have amounted to too little. Forty years later, he captured the depth of his disillusionment:

At the very time when my studies were most successful, there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored. I remember when it first, as it were, startled me to my feet: a poor Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord's wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution* office, carrying in my pocket a letter of introduction to Joel Chandler Harris. I did not get there. On the way the news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store further down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking. I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work. I did not meet Joel Chandler Harris nor the editor of the *Constitution*.³⁶

In his autobiography, Du Bois presented this “red ray” as a momentous turn in his career—away from the strict empiricism of social science and away from Washington’s politics of accommodation to Jim Crow segregation—toward writing *The Souls of Black Folk*. The memory

³⁶ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn : An Essay toward an Autobiography of the Race Concept* (1940 ; New Brunswick, NJ : Transaction Publishers, 1984), 67.

is also remarkable for how Du Bois displaced the violent trauma of Hose's lynching onto a failed exchange between himself and Joel Chandler Harris. Against the political economy of the New South that made negotiations over wages perilous for black sharecroppers, Du Bois meant to transform his "careful and reasoned statement" into critical public opinion via Harris's offices. Instead, the exchange dissolves in a series of failed relays. His body was made mute and immobile by the ubiquitous yet anonymous news. The letter in his pocket was defused by Hose's dismembered knuckles, unseen yet palpably present in the shop window. What Page could not have accepted as "concrete material" became for Du Bois hypervisible in an economy of black death in which the fields of central Georgia merged with the bustling thoroughfare of downtown Atlanta.

For Du Bois, Harris appeared not as Uncle Remus but as one node in a cultural economy of black death. As Du Bois remembered it, Harris was a neutral and distant presence in the unfolding of Hose's murder. He was a potential reader who could save a black life and yet could not be reached. Indeed, as editor of the *Constitution*, Harris was a relative moderate who publicly denounced lynching, albeit on grounds of racial paternalism rather than of civil rights. Nevertheless, Harris's political moderation masked his own impotence over the paper's editorial line. Anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, for one, singled-out the *Constitution* (but not Harris) for sensationalizing Hose's crime, anticipating his torture, and stoking vigilantism by offering a \$500 reward for his illegal capture.³⁷ What Du Bois registered in his memory, however, was the field of power and institutions in which his writing of black life—and black life itself—was

³⁷ In a pamphlet circulated by hand in Chicago, Ida B. Wells reported the assessment of a private detective she hired to investigate Hose's murder: "W. A. Hemphill, President and business manager, and Clark Howell, editor of the Atlanta Constitution, contributed more to the burning than any other men and all other forces in Georgia [sic]"; "Report of Detective Louis P. Le Vin," in Ida B. Wells, ed., *Lynch Law in Georgia* (Chicago: Chicago Colored Citizens, 1899), 15; see also 7-8. For an insightful reading of Du Bois's perception of Harris, and broader connections between Harris's folklore and the racist ideology that licensed lynching, see Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 181-84.

assigned value. Yet like fellow African American authors Ida B. Wells and James Weldon Johnson, ultimately Du Bois was not silenced but galvanized to defend black life precisely through writing.³⁸

In his varied essays written between 1897 and 1903, Du Bois defined his own writing as an act of redemption. He developed a pointed anti-materialist rhetoric to associate the deprivations of contemporary black life with the materialist ethos and practices of the contemporary corporate industrial economy. For Du Bois, America was not only a racist country but also one beholden to Mammon, in which “the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty.”³⁹ He criticized Booker T. Washington’s style of leadership for its strict appeal to “material advancement” and “material prosperity” of the race over and above expressions of beauty and spirit.⁴⁰ In his essays on the “Black Belt,” he showed that the villains were not only lynch mobs but also the English Dixie Cotton and Corn Company and the Northern Cotton Seed Oil Trust, and (with anti-Semitic rhetoric he would later regret and revise) Jewish creditors, “heir[s] of the slave baron”—all of whom were depressing the Southern economy while tying black Southern workers to a “second slavery” as sharecroppers.⁴¹ In this second slavery, rural black folk suffered doubly as laborers in the industrial economy and as abstract “material” in the nation’s conscience. “The average American can easily conceive of a rich land awaiting development and filled with black laborers,” Du Bois wrote. “To him the Southern problem is simply that of making efficient workingmen out of this material.”⁴²

³⁸ Goldsby also reminds that James Weldon Johnson, in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), figured his protagonist invest transformative hopes in reclaiming black folklore only to see them stymied within the “orbit of lynching’s violence” that extended from the deep South to the “nation’s cultural capital” in metropolitan New York and even to Paris. Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 164-213, quotation on 206.

³⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 81, 251.

⁴⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, 94, 43, 78.

⁴¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 130, 132, 126.

⁴² Du Bois, *Souls*, 167.

Rather than reduce the value of black life to the bare needs of the economy, Du Bois sought to demonstrate the transcendent human and cultural value in that same “material.” In “Of the Training of Black Folk,” originally published in the *Atlantic* in 1902, Du Bois famously claimed his place in the lofty heights of literature—“I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.” Yet he juxtaposed this lofty place not to uncultured black folk but to the material rendering of black persons into the very soil to which the lynch mob had consigned Sam Hose. “Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia?”⁴³ The problem, for Du Bois, was congenital to the nation itself. Black souls were not simply treated like material; they were the quintessential material of American culture. While Du Bois’s claim to cultural value was certainly inflected by the aspirations of the black middle class toward the ideals defined by Western literary tradition, he framed this move within a critique of the material basis of that civilization. Indeed he launched the essay with a deeper history that began when “the slave-ship first saw the square tower of Jamestown” and that “flowed down to our day.” While “human unity” expanded through the “multiplying of human wants in culture-lands,” so did certain groups of humanity exercise “force and dominion” over others to supply those wants. In this dialectic of civilization and domination, in which ideals of human unity were paradoxically entwined with ideologies of human difference (a “tangle of thought and afterthought”), Du Bois located the primal scene of black death. In the “thought of the older South,” African Americans became a “*tertium quid*,” a third thing between animal and man, a “clownish, simple creature”—did he have Uncle Remus in mind?—that could be enslaved and exploited for being less than human. The “heavy fact” of racism was not simply a Southern problem but an indictment of the nation’s abundance and its soul: If “we debauch the race thus caught in our talons, selfishly sucking their blood and brains in the future as in the past,

⁴³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 109.

what shall save us from national decadence?”⁴⁴ With these stakes, Du Bois sought to recover “the thought of the things themselves” as well as give new representation to the black soul within and beyond the status of thing.⁴⁵ Thus he revised the murder of Sam Hose, not simply lynched but “crucified”: not matter but a soul sacrificed.⁴⁶

In the penultimate chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk*—unpublished elsewhere—Du Bois went further. In narrating the lives and deaths of his son, his mentor, and a fictionalized projection of himself, Du Bois illustrated the human costs of American racism and gave literary form to the black soul that transcended mere matter. Within a year of Sam Hose’s lynching, Du Bois had been personally shaken by the deaths of his mentor Alexander Crummell in 1898 and of his infant son, Burghardt, in 1899, and he figured their deaths in religious allegories of ascension. In “Of the Passing of the First Born,” Du Bois marvels at how his child—“this tiny formless thing...a ludicrous thing to love”—transforms into his son, complete with “olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets.”⁴⁷ But the very material qualities of his son’s body marks him for death, at first infected by dysentery caused by substandard sewage systems in Atlanta and then by the racism that made black doctors a scarcity. In his eulogy for Crummell, Du Bois described an historical “tableau” that reconstructs the black clergyman’s fateful meeting with a Bishop Henry U. Onderdonk of Philadelphia in 1842. Crummell hoped to lead a black congregation in Philadelphia, a request Onderdonk would accept only on the most humiliating terms: that “no negro priest can sit at my church convention, and no negro church can ask for representation there.” Du Bois captured the irony by juxtaposing Crummell’s “threadbare coat thrown against the dark woodcut of [Onderdonk’s] book-cases, where Fox’s ‘Lives of the Martyrs’ nestled

⁴⁴ Du Bois, *Souls*, 88, 89.

⁴⁵ Du Bois, *Souls*, 89.

⁴⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, 111

⁴⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, 208.

happily beside ‘The Whole Duty of Man.’”⁴⁸ In these scenes, Du Bois juxtaposed the racial spirit of his son and his mentor to the world of matter that promised belonging while excluding them. Burghardt’s olive skin and dark curls marked him for death; Onderdonk’s books sneered at Crummell’s Christian appeal.

This movement was brought to a crescendo in “Of the Coming of John.” Here Du Bois returned to the scene of lynching. Instead of focusing on the plight of a sharecropper, however, Du Bois developed a parable around the story of a young Southern black man who receives a Northern education and returns home to find himself, as a consequence, ostracized from his black community and a target for the local white power structure. John’s dilemma called back to the “double consciousness” Du Bois set out in “Strivings”⁴⁹: he typified the inner “warring” that made him homeless in his own nation and community. John’s dilemma may also have figured Du Bois’s own in relation to the literary marketplace that sought either Uncle Remus or Stories from Tuskegee: John, rejecting both communal folkways and the Bookerite program, was marked for death. In any case Du Bois renders the moment of John’s death in language at once allusive and concrete. As John hears the lynch mob “thundering toward him,” John hums Wagner’s “Song of the Bride” and wonders if they brought “the coiling twisted rope.”⁴⁹

For Burghardt, Crummell, and John, redemption came by transcending the world of American matter. Du Bois imagines his son’s death as a new life with the “All-love,” “uncolored and unclothed,” a soul emancipated from the “Veil” of race that alienated his soul from his own physical features.⁵⁰ Though Crummell remained for Du Bois an example of defiance and diligent

⁴⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, 223.

⁴⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 249.

⁵⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, 214. Du Bois linked Burghardt at once to Jesus Christ and to Sam Hose; he refused to bury his son in Georgia for “the soil there is strangely red.” Lewis likewise links Hose and Burghardt’s death together as a dual calamity in Du Bois’s life that brought him to the brink of a nervous breakdown. See Lewis, *Biography of a Race*, 226-28.

activism, his life was “the world-wandering of a soul in search of itself...ever haunted by the shadow of a death that is more than death,” seeking “a new heaven and a new earth” in Africa.⁵¹ The fate of John’s soul was less certain. Besides the bars of Wagner, Du Bois imagined for him no escape but in death. It awaits another scholar to analyze Du Bois’s material aesthetic, but surely the “coiling twisted rope” is one of the most concrete images in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Indeed, what would become “the coiling twisted rope” began in the first draft as just “the rope”: Du Bois revised the reference to be more “concrete” in order to emphasize the materiality of racism—coiling like the Edenic snake itself. In both versions the story concluded by displacing the final moment of violence onto an image sublime for being both thunderous and abstract: “the storm burst round him.” Like Crummell, John too looked “toward the Sea,” except with eyes closed.⁵²

In the final chapter on “The Sorrow Songs,” Du Bois clinched this movement of resurrection: out of the “thoughts of the things themselves” were now the spiritual medium of the nation’s redemption. What Crummell sought in Africa, and what John sought in Wagner, Du Bois sought in the sublime historical experience of slavery endured by the black folk.⁵³ (Indeed part of the tragedy of John’s coming lay as much in his rejection of black cultural memory.) But it was at this same point that Du Bois entered the next phase in his work of writing. In fact, “the Sorrow Songs” was not only the last chapter in the book but also the last chapter to be written. According to his correspondence with his editor in Chicago, Du Bois seemed to be conceiving it while the rest of the book was already in press, and finished it while the first batch of galley proofs arrived. “I note that you will try to work out the chapter on the ‘Sorrow Songs,’” Francis G. Browne in

⁵¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 224-25.

⁵² Du Bois, fragment (holograph, corrected; c. 1903), p. 309, in box 3, folder 59, W. E. B. DuBois Collection (JWJ MSS 8), Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁵³ For Crummell as the foil to Du Bois’s “counter-sublime,” see Robert Gooding-Williams, “Du Bois’s Counter-Sublime,” *The Massachusetts Review* 35.2 (Summer 1994), 203-5, 217-19.

January, 1903, just three months before publication. “I very much hope it may materialize.”⁵⁴

What finally materialized—just in time for publication—was thus not only a culmination of Du Bois’s writing the black soul back to life but also the beginning of his work marketing that writing to America. As he had given literary form to an integral black soul out of the carnal economy of American racism, Du Bois was now tasked with turning that soul into the object form of a literary commodity.

III. Of Deed and Advertisement

When Du Bois reflected on the origins of *The Souls of Black Folk* in the forty and fifty years after its first printing, he began not with his famous essay on “double consciousness” or with the Sorrow Songs. He began with the Chicago publishing house, A. C. McClurg & Company, and its young editor, Francis G. Browne. Around 1900, “looking about for young and unknown authors,” Browne contacted Du Bois for “material for a book.” Du Bois responded promptly, though his original pitch—for a “broad and exhaustive study of the Negro Problem in the United States”—was “naturally” turned down in favor of “something more limited and aimed at a popular audience.” The literary product McClurg & Co. imagined would be a collection of “essays and sketches” comprised of articles Du Bois had already written for *The Atlantic* and other literary and scholarly periodicals, including, in 1901, McClurg’s own literary journal, *The Dial*, which published Du Bois’s critical review of Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*. Although Du Bois diligently “undertook to assemble” his articles for the Chicago firm, he was skeptical throughout the process. “I demurred,” he wrote in his first autobiography, “because books of essays almost always fall so flat.” He considered his essays less of a piece than an

⁵⁴ Browne to Du Bois, 30 Jan. 1903, DBP-UM.

assembly of “fugitive pieces.” By January 1903, he submitted to McClurg & Co. a typed manuscript, though he believed it to be “incomplete and unsatisfactory.”⁵⁵

At the same time Du Bois was imagining the Sorrow Songs as a gift given by the black soul to the nation, he feared that his literary commodity would fall flat in the national marketplace. Certainly, Du Bois was neither the first nor last author to express ambivalence, even regret, at the value of his work.⁵⁶ However, Du Bois pointed more precisely to the often overlooked history of the marketing of *The Souls of Black Folk*. This was a method of blending distinct from the racial admixture between “elements...Negro and Caucasian” that Du Bois imagined had transmitted the Sorrow Song across time and space. Rather, it was a blending shaped by the social relations and marketing idioms of an industrializing literary marketplace. Here Du Bois worked to define the value of his work and of the black soul in relation to the market for books about African American life and culture.

Du Bois was as attracted to McClurg & Co. as it was to him. As he later recalled, Du Bois perceived a unique opportunity in publishing with “[t]he Brownes, father and son,” who represented “in Chicago a movement to build a literary and publishing center in the Midwest.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Quotations interpolate passages from Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 80; and W. E. B. Du Bois, “Fifty Years After,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (rev. ed.; New York: The Blue Heron Press, 1953), ix; I thank Eric Slaughter for providing access to this edition. Du Bois did not reflect further about the origins of *The Souls of Black Folk* in his final autobiography, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968). See also Aptheker, Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, 5-10.

⁵⁶ He was surely expressing his long frustrated efforts to own his own book: only in 1948 could he purchase the original plates from McClurg & Co. McClurg & Co. valued the ownership of the plates at \$1000, which Du Bois could not afford and which other publishers declined to pay for a book already in circulation; in 1948, Du Bois secured the plates for \$100 when McClurg & Co. shuttered its publishing arm. See Aptheker, Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, 36-38.

⁵⁷ Du Bois, “Fifty Years After,” ix. Du Bois recalls both father and son being editors at McClurg in 1900. Historians of the firm suggest, however, that Francis Fisher Browne had been the chief literary editor for A. C. McClurg & Co until 1892, when he bought ownership of *The Dial* and restyled it as an independent journal of literary criticism. Browne and Alexander McClurg, owner of the firm, maintained their friendship until the McClurg’s death in 1901. By that time, Browne’s son, Francis G. Browne, had taken over his father’s old role as head of McClurg’s publishing department. See Frederick B. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin and History of the House of A. C. McClurg & Co.* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, c. 1902?), 11-12, 20; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 3: 1865-1885 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 539-543.

The Chicago movement that Du Bois remembered was both a business venture and a cultural project of national renewal. For literary writers and entrepreneurs at the turn of the twentieth century, Chicago was attractive for its distance from established east coast firms such as Harper Bros. and Appleton and its proximity to railroad hubs that could deliver books and magazines nationwide. For Hamlin Garland, a young writer and cultural critic from Wisconsin, this movement was especially salutary for dethroning staid east coast cultural authority and opening a path to renew the nation's literature on a more democratic foundation. In *Crumbling Idols* (1894), published after the World's Columbian Exposition by the upstart publishers Stone & Kimball, Garland proclaimed that Chicago, already an emerging center of industry, would become the nation's "literary and art center." As the center would draw in "local color" from the nation's regions, it would output America's "fiction of the future." But even Garland's iconoclastic vision would fail to pierce market conventions of race: the literary center for America's future fiction replicated the same racial order as the old one. Garland saw in the South a literary harvest of "shooting wilding plants and timorous blades of sown grains," the "negro" in particular fielding "a poetry and a novel as peculiarly his own as the songs he sings." As yet the "negro" was only a "subject" and not an "artist in his own right"; the "new study of the negro" remained the property of "Joel Harris."⁵⁸

Although the Brownes steered McClurg & Co. away from the vanguardism of Garland and Stone & Kimball, Francis Browne and Du Bois cultivated a relationship at once grounded in and exceeding Du Bois's "peculiarly" racial voice. For his part, Du Bois's choice of McClurg & Co. was likely a choice against Page and his association with both Washington and Harris, though one that would sustain the audience he had cultivated with his *Atlantic* writings. Founded

⁵⁸ Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art, Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting and the Drama* (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1894), 152, 79, 69, 71, 3.

by former Union Army General Alexander C. McClurg, who died in 1901, the company had established itself in the 1880s as one of Chicago's top retail book stores and regional publishers. By 1900, it was a business in expansion. Though they resisted the corporatization which was already restructuring their east coast competitors, the Brownes reoriented McClurg & Co. to the national literary marketplace.⁵⁹ After publishing Du Bois's review of *Up from Slavery*, Francis Browne courted Du Bois as a rising spokesperson for his race; his writings, he hoped, would draw national attention if not spectacular sales as a contribution to the public debate about the place of African Americans in the national polity and culture. In his letters to Du Bois, Browne encouraged the young sociologist to reach "Colored men as well as White," and counted on Du Bois's contacts with the African American press and his growing national reputation to spread the word; he even asked Du Bois to send a copy of the book personally to President Roosevelt in order to "make a great impression on the country."⁶⁰ Fielding a rival to Washington, Browne likely also saw the chance to raise the firm's profile both as a literary publisher and a shaper of public opinion.

Whereas Page preferred a "concrete" idiom that supported clear-cut narratives, Browne gave Du Bois free reign over his prose: changes to the text were infrequent, solved quickly, and in the author's favor, including Du Bois's stern denunciations of American imperialist war in the Caribbean and the Philippines.⁶¹ The relationship between editor and author was not without

⁵⁹ Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *The Rise of Chicago as a Literary Center from 1885 to 1920: A Sociological Essay in American Culture* (Totowa, N.J.: The Bedminster Press, 1964), viii-xiii; John Tebbel, *The Expansion of an Industry, 1865-1919*, vol. 1 of *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1975), 427-430.

⁶⁰ Browne to Du Bois, 19 March 1903, in DBP-UM.

⁶¹ Browne suggested Du Bois remove references to American imperial military missions in the Pacific and Caribbean; we do not have Du Bois's reply, but Du Bois managed to keep the critical line in which he dismissed emigration as a viable escape from America's "lying and brute force": "nothing had more effectually made this programme seem hopeless than the recent course of the United States toward weaker and darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines" (52). In fact, judging from the extant correspondence, Browne seems to have pressed for few revisions to the text—and very few revisions were made to the text in subsequent editions of the book put out by McClurg. Du Bois seems to have been in control of the revision process for both his previously

tension, however, particularly around questions of marketing. Though Du Bois agreed to a standard contract, in which McClurg & Company promised to give the book no more than a “moderate amount of general magazine and newspaper advertising,” the correspondence between Du Bois and his editor revolved around nearly nothing else.⁶² In late January 1903, with the bulk of the manuscript and a signed contract in hand, Browne sent Du Bois a sample of the book’s announcement for the national press. “I want the announcement to be satisfactory to you in every respect,” he wrote, “but of course the work will require rather different handling from the ordinary work.”⁶³

What made *The Souls of Black Folk* different from an “ordinary” book, and what sort of “different handling” would be required, was how Browne assigned value to his author’s race. Though Du Bois and Browne agreed to set the book’s market price to a maximum of \$1.20, a typical price for trade books, throughout the process of production Du Bois admonished the publisher to affirm the book’s cultural value as literature. The issue was raised more than once. After a month of strong sales which necessitated a second printing in May, Browne broached the possibility of accelerating sales further by promoting the book in more “sensational ways.” Browne had been following “the dreadful event in our town of Belleville a few days ago”—a

published articles and chapters newly written for *Souls*. Fifty years later, when Du Bois bought the copyright and the printing plates from McClurg—he planned a fiftieth anniversary edition with Blue Heron Press in New York—the most significant revisions he made were to remove his own pejorative references to the role of “shrewd and unscrupulous Jews” in exploiting black labor after Reconstruction (169). For a discussion of the question of Du Bois’s complex attitudes toward Jews, see Michael P. Kramer, “W. E. B. Du Bois, American Nationalism, and the Jewish Question,” in *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism*, Reynolds J. Scott-Childress, ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 169-194. See also Aptheker, “Introduction.”

⁶² W. E. B. Du Bois Contract, 20 Jan 1903, p. 1, in A. C. McClurg Records, The Newberry Library, Box 5. Du Bois’s contract stipulated similar terms to those signed around the same time in the McClurg records: the book would retail at \$1.00 to \$1.20, of which the author received 10% of the price “of all copies sold over and above the first five hundred (500) copies sold” (1); McClurg held the copyright while Du Bois held ownership of the book; removal of the book would require Du Bois to purchase the electrotype and binder’s plates from the publisher (2)—which Du Bois would do to publish a fiftieth-anniversary edition with Blue Heron Press in 1953. See also contracts in McClurg Records: Robert Ames Bennet, 2 Aug 1904 (Box 1), Clark E. Carr, 6 July 1904 (Box 2), Frances Watson Corruth, 22 Apr 1899 (Box 2), Sherwin Cody, 18 Dec 1901 and 20 Jan 1903 (Box 2).

⁶³ Browne to Du Bois, 30 Jan 1903, DBP-UM.

lynching of a black teacher in downstate Illinois—and thought it resonated with “Of the Coming of John.” Though Browne weakened his suggestion—“we hesitate to do this”—Du Bois without qualification refused to support any “sensational advertising.” He would rather McClurg & Co.’s promotional efforts target a “better class” of readers, appealing particularly to William James’s private assessment that the book would gain “a recognized place in literature hereafter,” which Du Bois forwarded to Browne.⁶⁴ Browne backed off his tentative suggestion; future advertisements, he assured his author, would be done “in a conservative way.”⁶⁵

Du Bois’s position reflected his adherence to traditional cultural values, affirmed with his appeal to an eminent philosopher and open desire a “better” readership. Yet Browne’s linking of the book’s lynching narrative with “sensational advertising” struck a deeper nerve. For the author who “sat with Shakespeare,” a sensational advertisement that capitalized on the lynching of a black teacher was tantamount to returning him to the red Georgia soil. Not only would the advertisement undo Du Bois’s carefully calibrated writing that concretely represented John’s spiritual striving without reducing his murder to a mere spectacle; it also broached a more exploitative exchange in which Du Bois saw his value as a literary author dissolve in a market of black matter, an exchange that Chesnut had linked to black death.⁶⁶

Du Bois seemed reticent even to use his own photograph to advertise the book. In April, with the book fresh from the press and after repeated requests from Browne, Du Bois could only furnish a low-quality copy of his portrait rather than an original print. “Half-tone reproductions will not answer,” his editor insisted. “An original is necessary.”⁶⁷ The marriage of book and

⁶⁴ Browne to Du Bois, 10 June 1903, James quoted in Du Bois to Browne, n.d., DBP (2:453, 2:454).

⁶⁵ Browne to Du Bois, 19 June 1903 and Browne to Du Bois, 10 Oct 1903, DBP (2:456).

⁶⁶ Associating Du Bois’s image with newspaper coverage of lynching against blacks would not only have lent the marketing of *Souls* an air of “sensationalism.” It would have, along the lines Jacqueline Goldsby argues for Wells and Johnson, associated Du Bois’s book with the journalistic and visual mediums that “made the violence easier to disavow”; see Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 229.

⁶⁷ Browne to Du Bois, 18 Apr 1903, DBP (2:449).

portrait would not be consummated until June 29, when Browne sent Du Bois a copy of his portrait to sign, though the autographed portrait would be printed with the book's frontispiece in the 16th edition—in 1929. By August, whether by Browne's or Du Bois's instruction is unknown, the circulation of Du Bois's face in print advertisements seemed to be restricted to major African-American newspapers (e.g. fig. 2.2). Du Bois was constructing a different relationship to a black readership, as we will see. However, his aversion to photography at this moment is surprising given his savvy with the form and particularly with his own self portrait. Yet Du Bois was also aware of the ways refined or merely sympathetic photographs of African Americans could be manipulated at the point of production and reception. In 1901, for Page's *World's Work* magazine, "Of the Black Belt" and "The Quest of the Golden Fleece" were first published as "The Negro As He Really Is" with photographic accompaniment. Though photographer A. Radclyff Dugmore's views largely supported Du Bois's presentation of the black folk of Albany County, Georgia, as historical beings active in scenes of labor, commerce, and education, their effect was undercut by an editor's captions that linked Du Bois's subjects to the level of Uncle Remus. A scene of children playing became a "Pickaninny Cake Walk"; an elderly man, "George Washington's Friend."

Du Bois's ambivalence toward advertising had its roots in what scholars have taken to be one of the signal triumphs of his career and an example of his canny sense of visual and material culture: the American Negro Exhibit at the *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris in 1900. In an article written to promote the exhibit, he emphasized how he curated the progress of African Americans—from "homeless freedman" to the well-dressed students in "the modern brick schoolhouse"—with "all the usual paraphernalia for catching the eye—photographs, models,

industrial work, and pictures.”⁶⁸ But as he would recall in his final memoir, he considered his triumph at Paris a personal failure—a failure to advertise. It was “a significant occurrence which not until lately have I set in its proper place in my life.” Despite receiving a Gold Medal and significant press coverage for his work, Du Bois returned to Atlanta unable to capitalize on his success to secure new funding—even “in this rich land”—for his ongoing sociological conferences at the university. In retrospect, he “failed” because he did not answer a “typically American” problem: he did not properly advertise himself. Despite the notice he circulated in the national press, he would only later recall that “I did the deed but did not advertise it.” The blame ultimately rested not merely with his own neglect to advertise but chiefly with the distorting effects advertising had on American perceptions of image and reality. “Indeed the philosophy then current and afterward triumphant,” Du Bois reflected, “was that the Deed without Advertising was worthless and in the long run. Advertising without Deed was the only lasting value.”⁶⁹

Contemplating the American Negro Exhibit at the height of a new revolution in advertising in the 1960s, Du Bois stood amazed that “Americans do not realize how completely they have adopted this philosophy. But Madison Avenue does.”⁷⁰ At the turn of the century, however, he more directly applied his thinking about advertising to the problem of race. In an article written at the launch of *The Souls of Black Folk* in the spring of 1903, Du Bois heralded the “Possibilities of the Negro” in all fields of human endeavor, from industry to the arts. As in 1900, Du Bois gave precedence to African American writers (now excluding Corrothers and

⁶⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The American Negro in Paris,” in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, vol. 1: 1891-1909 (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1982), 87. The article was originally published in *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 22 (Nov. 1900), 575-77, and under the title, “Sociological Exhibit of American Negroes,” *Public Opinion* (Nov. 15, 1900).

⁶⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 220-21.

⁷⁰ Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 221.

Washington) not simply for their connection to an authentic blackness but for their work in expressing the experience of the black soul: Dunbar “sprang from slave parents and poverty” and wrote with “a tinge of the sorrow songs”; Chesnutt resisted “the temptation of money making” and “touch[ed] a new realm in the borderland between the races.” Yet after writing and marketing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois framed the work of this “Advanced Guard” within the social relations of commodity capitalism. “When, then, the average American rushes to his telephone there is nothing in the look of the transmitter to tell him that it is part product of a Negro brain; when the whizz of the engine weaves cloth, drags trains, and does other deeds of magic, it does not tell the public that the oil which smooths its turning is the composition of a black man.” But while Du Bois seemed to call for an advertisement of telephones and motor oil that showed them to be products of “a Negro brain,” he was equally aware how such an advertisement would be received by a white audience that devalued black cultural labor, vocalized by “a Texas girl who naively remarked: ‘I used to read Dunbar a good deal until I found out that he was a nigger.’” Du Bois pinpointed the dilemma of advertising that could both demonstrate the value of African American deeds and devalue them with marks of racist inequality: “Thus his work becomes gathered up and lost in the sum of American deeds, and men know little of the individual.”⁷¹ He might have had in mind not only the little girl’s stark racism but also Morse’s cover. However beautiful such a cover might have seemed to Du Bois to subsume the spiritual integrity of the black folk—and the integrity of his labor as a writer—in the currents of commodification.

The choice to suit the book about the souls of black folk with a black cover, then, can be seen as part of a larger project to harness the transformative potential of commodity exchange.

⁷¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Possibilities of the Negro: The Advance Guard of the Race,” *Booklover’s Magazine* (Philadelphia) 2 (July 1903): 2-15; in Aptheker, ed., *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, 1:167, 161.

Du Bois approached the production and marketing of *The Souls of Black Folk* as a delicate act of commodification. It was with the book cover, not the authorial photograph, that Du Bois most readily defined the value not only of his own deed but those of the black souls in the book. Unlike a telephone transmitter or motor oil, *The Souls of Black Folk* was both the work of an African American author and a reflection of African American experience; it could repair the connection between advertisement and deed. At the same time, like Browne's proposed "sensational advertisement" or Du Bois's half-toned authorial photograph, the wrong cover could lose Du Bois's deed among "the sum" or devalue it as mere racial matter. Even though he "greatly preferred" the black cover, Du Bois left little other explicit or formalized thought about his sense of book design as an advertisement of deeds. Indeed, though he publicly championed Chesnutt and Dunbar, he only had a partial collection of their books, having to ask Dunbar personally and Dodd, Mead & Co. later for complete bibliographies, and only in 1916 receiving a copy of *Oak & Ivy* as a gift.⁷² When Du Bois took inventory of his personal library in 1930 and again in 1950, he held what Leon Jackson calls the attitude of the activist-collector. Unlike bibliophiles who burnished their books as examples of bookbinding, typography, and other material markings, Du Bois organized his collection to continue his display at the American Negro Exhibit, a demonstration African American advancement and equality in world civilization.⁷³ In 1903, however, he saw particular value in suiting *The Souls of Black Folk* in the generic black cover that Browne had "stamped up."

⁷² Dunbar to Du Bois, May 28, 1903; Dodd, Mead & Co. to Du Bois, Feb. 24, 1906; Du Bois to William R. Fisher, March 10, 1916, in DBP.

⁷³ Excepting Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman*, Du Bois did not possess these "chic" specimens of black book design when his library was indexed circa 1930 and 1950, preferring the classical designs of Dunbar's *Oak and Ivy* and Corrothers's autobiography, *In Spite of the Handicap*, and overlooking the work of Pauline Hopkins. See Series 16 (reel 89), DBP-UM.

Du Bois's choice to cover *The Souls of Black Folk* in solid black appears as both an affirmation of the book's origins and a rejection of modern style. Yet it must also be seen against the cover from *Up from Slavery* (1901; fig. 2.3), which by 1903 represented to both Du Bois and Browne a marketplace rival. Like the book's prose, the plain red cover of *Up from Slavery* was deliberately humble. Even though great sales of Washington's autobiography were projected from the start, Page evidently invested less in the graphic design of the cover than he did at Houghton Mifflin for Harris's plantation folklore or Chesnut's "experimental" rejoinders to them. Nor did Washington use his considerable sway to press for a more elaborate design. With a regular binding and gilded titling, the cover of *Up from Slavery* bespoke the utilitarian message of uplift through vocational training, diligent labor, and thrift. The plain red cover can be seen as less a refusal to decorate than an embrace of the pure color of the marketplace to package a story of racial uplift.

Such a cover would have suited neither Du Bois's conception of black souls nor McClurg & Co.'s conception of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Although they were conservative relative to the ostentatiously "decadent" style of fellow Chicago publishers Stone & Kimball, McClurg & Co. balanced their claims to literary tradition with their eager adoption of aesthetic strategies for large-scale book marketing. In a statement about recent trends in the publishing industry in 1901, the elder Browne cast a wary gaze over the commercialization and industrialization of the trade as a symptom of general cultural decline; but he embraced such transformations in the "artistic and mechanical sides of bookmaking" in so far as they tended toward "a finer and wider development of art."⁷⁴ Even the elite Chicago Literary Club, which counted both Brownes as members and promoted an ideology of cultural conservatism, decorated their yearbooks in *art*

⁷⁴ Francis F. Browne, "American Publishing and Publishers," *The Dial* 28 (May 1, 1900), 341.

nouveau designs.⁷⁵ Indeed, though we do not know what other choices he offered Du Bois, the younger Browne may have “stamped up” a cover in the style of McClurg’s ongoing series of Southern “sketches.” Samuel Minturn Peck’s *Alabama Sketches* (1904; fig. 2.4), for instance, was one of four released around the time of *Souls*, each sharing a cover design—the title set within a discrete pattern of interweaving ivy.⁷⁶ Yet neither Du Bois nor Browne chose to include *The Souls of Black Folk* among these “sketches” and so delimit its scope and value as a “Southern” product.

Indeed, within this ecology of Southern “sketches” and plantation folklore, Du Bois made his book undoubtedly black. Rather than repeat the human commodification of slavery in consumer capitalism’s uncanny idioms of reification (“the conversion of things into persons and the conversion of persons into things”), Du Bois imagined his book performing its own transformations on and within his reader.⁷⁷ In his “Forethought,” Du Bois described his “little book” as an ancient tome for the reader to excavate and decipher. “Herein lie buried many things,” Du Bois wrote to his “Gentle Reader,” inviting him to “seek[] the grain of truth hidden there.” In the “After-Thought,” Du Bois pushed the origins of the book further back in time, delivering it to the reader as a product of nature. He compensated with the sparse graphic design by imagining an impossible *art nouveau* of tangled leaves:

Hear my cry, O God the Reader, vouchsafe for me that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations,

⁷⁵ See Chicago Literary Club Year Books for 1902-1903, 1903-1904, 1904-1905 in box 9, folder 399, Francis Fisher Browne Papers, Modern Manuscript Collection, The Newberry Library, Chicago.

⁷⁶ Mary Nelson Carter, *North Carolina Sketches: Phases of Life Where the Galax Grows* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1900); Will N. Harben, *Northern Georgia Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1900); Louisa Preston Looney, *Tennessee Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1901); Samuel Minturn Peck, *Alabama Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1904)

⁷⁷ For the metamorphosis—conceptual and sensational—of the commodity in the currents of circulation, see Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols., trans. Ben Fawkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 1:206-9, quotation on 209. See also Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006): 175-207.

in this dear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare. Thus in Thy good time
may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be
not indeed

THE END⁷⁸

Perhaps what had been the red Georgia soil that had entombed the black soul had become, in Du Bois's literary performance of transubstantiation, a redemptive harvest. Like the Sorrow Song, *The Souls of Black Folk* was a gift, but one that demanded reciprocation in the form of "human brotherhood" from its recipient: the reader and his 70 million fellow Americans. If Du Bois was imagining the reader holding *The Souls of Black Folk* as a stand-in for a black soul, he also imagined that book as a stage in a material metamorphosis from fragile leaves to the harvest wonderful. *The Souls of Black Folk* was Du Bois's final act of resurrection, and the life he created was infused with its own power to transform the world wilderness in its image.

IV. The Incorporation of the Black Soul

The design of *The Souls of Black Folk* meant not only to change how white readers related to the black soul and its part in the nation's history; for Du Bois it was the beginning of a larger work of black emancipation within the burgeoning cultural industry. "I want the little book to be satisfactory to you in every way mechanically," Browne wrote while sending along the page proofs in early February. "I like the proposed page very much," Du Bois replied. Though he had "no critique to offer" he praised the proofs for being "simple & legible."⁷⁹ While he imagined his book as "crooked marks on a fragile leaf," an imaginary design no doubt sustained as he composed the drafts in longhand, Du Bois was writing and thinking about his book as a product for mass manufacture and consumption. The manuscript that he sent to McClurg was

⁷⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, vii, n.p. [265].

⁷⁹ Browne to Du Bois, 7 Feb 1903; Du Bois to Browne, n.d., DBP.

typed by his secretary, Inez Canty, on an upright typewriter in the summer of 1902.⁸⁰ In turn, from his vantage in Atlanta, he saw McClurg & Co. edit manuscript pages, retype them, and send them to the printers John Williams & Son in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which were then sent back to Du Bois for his approval before growing through another metamorphosis into a bound and salable book.⁸¹ In a testament not only to McClurg & Co.'s marketing efforts but also to the productive capacity of the new linotype machine, *The Souls of Black Folk* spooled out of the press at a high clip: by October 1903, McClurg measured sales at 200 copies per week; by 1909, nearly 9,595 copies would be sold, 4768 in 1903 alone.⁸² Du Bois would have earned about \$500 in royalties, about \$13,700 relative to today's dollar.⁸³

These numbers made *The Souls of Black Folk* a modest success but paled next to its marketplace and ideological competitors. By 1903, Doubleday, Page and Co. had sold 30,000 copies of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, with demand "steadily continuing," though it was still outsold by another book on Doubleday's list, Thomas Dixon's white supremacist romance *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), the nation's best-seller at over 100,000 copies.⁸⁴ Whereas Harris's folklore sought to preserve the "Negro" as a cultural object, and Washington's autobiography sought to accommodate the narrative of racial uplift with the system of racial segregation, Dixon's novel, the first of a sprawling trilogy of the Ku Klux Klan, represented a new, virulent racism that would rid America of the sin of slavery by exterminating black

⁸⁰ Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 642n31; Lewis cites an interview with Canty's cousin, Maurice Thomas, in Bill Winn, "Du Bois Helped Reshape the American Mind," Columbus (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer*, 27 Mar. 1988, F1, F4.

⁸¹ Browne to Du Bois, 26 Feb 1903, DBP.

⁸² Aptheker, "Introduction," 34-35; Lewis, *Biography of a Race*, 291; Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: the Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30.

⁸³ The figure for 1903 is estimated from his contract, in which he earned a standard 10% from the \$1.20 marketprice after the first 500 books sold; value for 2014 estimated relative to historic standard of living (see measuringworth.com). By 1935, Du Bois had made \$2,450 in royalties from *The Souls of Black Folk*.

⁸⁴ Publisher's sales report in *New York Times* (12 Sept. 1903), cited in Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: the Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 251.

people.⁸⁵ Du Bois saw in these numbers, then, not simply a reflection of popular racism but a political economy of race. By contrast, Walter Hines Page, who brought both Washington and Dixon to market, saw a free marketplace of ideas of which he still considered Du Bois a valuable part. “I wonder if you are not at work on material that will in the course of time take book form,” he wrote in 1905. Du Bois held fast to McClurg & Co, for whom he was writing a novel (“virtually finished”), but floated the prospect of publishing his long-thought-about “Sociology of the Negro,” “designed to be a popular presentation of the matter in literary form + small compass with such diluted science and history as the mass[es] can stand.” Following his experience with *The Souls of Black Folk*, it was not enough for Du Bois to redesign the science and history of race for the masses; he also flexed what power he could in the marketplace. “Will you let me say frankly that when it is written I cannot help but hesitate to offer it to the exploiters of Tom Dixon?”⁸⁶ Page himself associated Dixon with the hostile political conservatism that had compelled him and other Southern liberals to move their careers northward. But even as Dixon represented “my enemies’ doctrine,” Page would “have felt ashamed...if I had hesitated, as a director of a publishing house, to give him the same freedom of its use that I have always asked of his side with their machinery of publication.”⁸⁷

Page’s claim that Dixon’s freedom was under threat by the very machinery of publication that profited from his novels must have struck Du Bois as absurd. Yet the exchange between Du Bois and Page betrayed their mutual understanding of the literary field as a cultural industry, one in which freedom was contingent on access to the means of production. Well before he wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*, and in his publishing activities that immediately followed, Du Bois

⁸⁵ See Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

⁸⁶ Page to Du Bois, Nov. 22, 1905, and Du Bois to Page, n.d., DBP. Nevertheless Du Bois would pitch an article to Page’s *World’s Work* in 1908; see Page to Du Bois, Dec. 1, 1908, DBP.

⁸⁷ Page to Du Bois, Nov. 27, 1905, DBP.

expressed an evolving sense of the culture industry as a front for his broader project of black emancipation. If the historical experience of slavery gave African Americans purchase on the nation's polity and conscience, so must it return material reward and power over America's proliferating cultural machinery. *The Souls of Black Folk* held especial value not only as an object that could deliver the Sorrow Songs to the nation, but one that could give African Americans a new hold on the material sensorium of an emerging mass culture.

As a writer and entrepreneur, Du Bois meant his cultural practice to complete the exchange begun with the Sorrow Songs. As he gave over the manuscript to the literary industry via the agency of McClurg & Co., Du Bois was imagining himself at the center of a complementary system of mass marketing attuned to the desires of black folk. Although both Du Bois and Browne had assumed a primarily white readership for the book, a year after its publication Du Bois tried to expand the sales to African American readers. As McClurg & Co. released an edition of the book for subscription sale, Du Bois asked Browne to write to "Negro schools for agents" who would sell the book to black readers distant from urban markets. McClurg was employing a less direct strategy, "advertising for agents in the Negro journals," which Browne realized "cannot bring the scheme to the attention of too many." He encouraged Du Bois write to solicit canvassers from black schools directly. With subscription selling, black canvassers could sell *The Souls of Black Folk* directly to black people. Du Bois hired one of his students at Atlanta University, Arthur Butler, to "s[ell] some of my books" and sent him to Browne so that "he might sell some more."⁸⁸

While *The Souls of Black Folk* certainly found its share of black readers at the time—future author Jessie Fauset and lawyer Earl B. Dickerson among many more—Du Bois developed ambitions beyond the limited reach of door-to-door subscription sale. He was

⁸⁸ Du Bois to Browne, 30 March 1904; Browne to Du Bois, 6 April 1904; Du Bois to Browne, 13 June 1904.

imagining a mass market of black folk. In 1903, the idea of black readers was still considered a novelty for elite literary publishers. Yet increased access to literacy became for African Americans one of the most visible expressions of black freedom and for social scientists a measurable quantum of post-slavery progress. Abolitionists and reformers such as Frederick Douglass and Frances Harper declared their freedom through print and advocated for spreading literacy to the race. Indeed, the very act of reading a book, as Christopher Hager shows in his painstaking research of freed people's correspondence, was a symbolic and tangible expression of emancipation for African Americans of all stripes.⁸⁹ A later generation of "New Negroes" who came of age in the 1890s, such as Dunbar, Chesnutt, Corrothers, and Washington, declared their membership to modern America through their access to the national world of print. But these achievements were only the most visible result of a much broader lettering of African American society. In 1860, only 5% of African Americans were literate; by 1880 the proportion was 30% and by 1922 77%. In that time, the number of African Americans in the printing trades also increased, from 66 in 1890 to 86 in 1900 and 278 in 1910—among them Lewis Henry Douglass, Frederick's son. On this foundation, venerable publications like the *A. M. E. Church Review* found new readership, black entrepreneurs like T. Thomas Fortune, J. Max Barber, and Robert Sengstacke Abbott founded newspapers and magazines for working and middle-class black readerships; and scores of black women organized reading groups and magazines, Ida B. Wells and Pauline Hopkins chief among them. This is to say nothing of the rising number of black

⁸⁹ Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Reading* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

clergy, authors, poets, and scholars who distributed texts through small, black-owned presses, such as Sutton E. Griggs's Orion Publishing Co. in Nashville.⁹⁰

Literacy was the cornerstone of black freedom, and Du Bois one of its strongest advocates. In addition to defending his place in the heights of literature, he gave perhaps his strongest argument against "artificial differences of rank or birth or race" to protest the Jim Crow policy of Atlanta's Carnegie Library in 1902.⁹¹ Scholars have ably demonstrated the centrality of print culture for Du Bois's conception and practice of political activism and racial representation: Du Bois's proposal of 1906 turned into the short-lived *Moon Illustrated Monthly* (1906); he then helped run *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* from 1907 to 1910 before founding and serving as editor of *The Crisis*, a robust, illustrated, and widely-read magazine of the NAACP.⁹² But even as he sought to bend the idioms of print to develop new discourses and iconography of race in 1905, Du Bois saw his proposed magazine as the agent of transforming black folk themselves. Partly, his proposal reflected his own entrepreneurial spirit that reflected his boosterism of black-owned businesses, a spirit he had earlier endorsed and honed by supporting Booker T. Washington and the Negro Business League. Unlike Washington's ethos, however, Du Bois's proposal projected a spirit of emancipation based not solely on an ethic of production and thrift but also on mass consumerism. Indeed his vision for the magazine overflowed the limits of

⁹⁰ James P. Danky, "Reading, Writing, and Resisting: African American Print Culture," in *History of the Book in America*, 4:339-58; Elizabeth McHenry, "Reading and Race Pride: The Literary Activism of Black Club Women," in *ibid.*, 4:491-510.

⁹¹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, "The Opening of the Library," *The Independent* 54 (Apr. 3, 1902), 809.

⁹² Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Katherine Capshaw Smith, *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), chap 1;

available capital as he prophesized an even more dramatic transformation of African American consciousness through their contact with the mass market and its culture of consumption.⁹³

Two years following the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois requested funds to launch his own “Negro Journal” from the German-born Jewish banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff—who would himself chide Du Bois for his anti-Semitic language in *The Souls of Black Folk* (“The Jew is the heir of the slave baron”). Du Bois conceived his proposed magazine as a vehicle to foster “group cooperation” among black Americans and “the darker races in general” in order to advance “cultural and social reform” within the group and to “repel unjust attack” without. Comparing his vision to that of his “ordinary” competitors for black magazine readership, the Bookerite *Colored American* and Barber’s *The Voice of the Negro*, Du Bois imagined a more multifaceted publication which would deliver informative articles, news, and “good illustrations” with the methods of “modern aggressive business management.” Imagining not only a magazine but also a global and “efficient” news service to cover the United States, West Indies, and Africa, as well as an auxiliary publishing arm to publish “reading for Negro schools, text-books, [and] works of Negro authors,” Du Bois coupled a faith in the regenerative effects of reading with the business sense of a modern manager. Before his appeal to Schiff, just a year after publishing *Souls*, Du Bois entered a business partnership with Atlanta University graduate Edward L. Simon and invested his savings into a Memphis printing press. Since March 1904, they had invested \$2734.74 into the business and received \$1343.28 after eight months in

⁹³ Despite the emphasis on black ownership, authorship, and readership of the magazine, Du Bois appealed to Schiff for capital because of the constraints of his own limited salary at Atlanta University (\$1200) and the cost of supporting his family—as well as the scarcity of investment capital “among Negroes for most of them are poorer than I. Moreover they would want quicker returns than I could promise”; Du Bois, “A Proposed Negro Journal,” 79.

operation; Du Bois asked Schiff for \$10,000 in capital investment to print the first year's run of the journal, hire a staff of editors and technicians, and purchase a linotype typewriter.⁹⁴

Du Bois did not use the word “corporation,” and his existing business was most likely organized as a limited partnership, but his vision was of a piece with the impulse for efficiency and consolidation which was shaping not only business practices but also movements of progressive social reform at the time.⁹⁵ Inherent in Du Bois's enterprise was an impulse to incorporate not only black publishing but also to represent a “new race consciousness to the modern world and reveal[] the inner meaning of the modern world to the emerging races”—a dynamic exchange that revised his failed childhood trade of visiting cards and corresponded to the broader commerce he imagined in *Sorrow Songs*. Strikingly, however, Du Bois phrased this problem of creating modern consciousness as a “problem of business management” which smaller-scale black magazines had avoided but his journal would tackle through “modern publishing methods.” As other magazine publishers were doing at the time, by 1905 Du Bois thought of “modern publishing methods” interchangeably with “modern advertising methods”: the journal would undercut its sale price to consumers and turn a profit by selling page space to advertisers. Counting a population of 3,562,387 literate African Americans, 200,000 current subscribers to “one or more” regional black newspapers or journals, and “a large additional number [who] could be induced to read and to look at pictures,” Du Bois projected a circulation for his journal of 50,000 to 100,000 black people whose attention he could sell to advertisers.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Du Bois, “A Proposed Negro Journal” (April 1905), in Aptheker, ed., *Against Racism*, 77-81.

⁹⁵ For the corporate re-organization of the American economy and its effect on moral, social, and political consciousness, especially among the nation's middle class, see Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution*; Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

⁹⁶ Du Bois, “A Proposed Negro Journal.” For the shift in the financial underpinnings of the magazine industry from selling copy to readers to selling readers' attention to advertisers, see Ohmann, *Selling Culture*.

For Du Bois, his proposed journal was an agent of modernity that would produce a new consciousness by transforming black readers into consumers. This transformation was the essence of Du Bois's business strategy: convincing advertisers to invest in the attention of "a peculiar people who are not used to modern advertising methods."⁹⁷ What is more, he gave new meaning to a question posed by Adam Green for a later moment of African-American cultural enterprise: "What did it mean to sell the race in the face of a history in which race's sale constituted the defining condition of a people's history?"⁹⁸ Before the Great Migration, however, selling the race not only meant selling the attention of black folk to advertisers; it also meant reconceptualizing how a largely rural people would define their freedom amid the sensory environment of a mass consumer economy that was then just beginning to encroach on their lives—as they moved to cities, and as that economy moved southward. How would the formerly enslaved and their children translate the value of their cultural property into material power?

V. A Burst of Brilliant Color

Speaking to an audience at Wilberforce University shortly after returning from his European studies in 1896, Du Bois offered a class of graduating black students a view of the "Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe." It was a fairly conservative survey of Classical and Renaissance "masters," from Greek sculptors to Michelangelo, concluding with Rembrandt. For Du Bois, Rembrandt held a place of honor for his dedication to portraying "life as [he] saw it—everyday themes"—as well as for his humble origins and disciplined work ethic—and his use of color. In addition to being "a miller's boy born at sleepy Leyden," the Dutch master was "a good hearted fellow, always in debt, always at work, painting his wonderful yellow light." The

⁹⁷ Du Bois, "A Proposed Negro Journal," 79.

⁹⁸ Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 48.

painter's ability to reproduce a "wonderful yellow light," in Du Bois's telling, stood side-by-side with his quotidian existence—reinforcing Du Bois's argument about the universal capacity (and right) for making and perceiving beauty.⁹⁹

But Du Bois also betrayed a more idiosyncratic, even modernist sense of color. To illustrate his vision to his audience, Du Bois held up a black and white reproduction of Rembrandt's most famous painting, *The Night Watch*. "You should see it as I saw it," he told the assembled black college students, "in a burst of brilliant color, and at the end of the long hall in the gallery at Amsterdam." Though he noted that the painting was meant to "represent[] the assembly of a company of militia," he urged on his audience his impression of "its energy and action and wonderful play of light and shade."¹⁰⁰ Though originally titled *Captain Frans Banning Cocq Mustering His Company* (1642), the painting had become popularly known as "The Night Watch" due to the heavy grime and varnish which had accumulated on its surface; the painting would not be restored until 1946-47, revealing a daytime scene illuminated by sunlight.¹⁰¹ When Du Bois saw the painting in Amsterdam in the 1890s, his diminishment of the human figures was most likely an effect of its coated surface, which may also have enhanced the effect of the "burst" of yellow light. His emphasis of color may also have been a rhetorical strategy to compensate for the lack of color in his black and white prints. Yet Du Bois's sense of sheer light, shade, and color—a sense which he admonished his audience to adopt—was modern for its abstraction. Du Bois momentarily forgot the "character" of the painting amid its pure

⁹⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe" (c. 1896-98), in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 42. Du Bois only very briefly mentioned one more artist after Rembrandt: the Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682) who "turned to the slums and the gutters to find the picturesque and the striking" (42).

¹⁰⁰ Du Bois, "The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe," 42.

¹⁰¹ Art critic Alexander Elliot complained that "The Night Watch" had become "The Day Watch" in *Sight and Insight* (1959); quoted in Sheldon Keck, "Some Picture Cleaning Controversies: Past and Present," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 23.2 (Spring 1984), 83; see also Ton Koot, *Rembrandt's Night Watch: Its History and Adventures*, trans. C. M. Hutt (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff [1949]).

colors—speaking of Rembrandt as if he were an Impressionist, or if his painting was an advertisement.¹⁰²

As with many of his fellow black intellectuals and reformers, Du Bois's cultural politics were infused with bourgeois values. At the turn of the century, especially, he conceived of himself among the "Talented Tenth," a leadership class that would act as a cultural, political, and financial vanguard for the race as a whole. Yet Du Bois's cultural elitism was coupled with a cultural populism that went beyond a conventional reverence for the rural black folk. The dual movement in his Wilberforce speech modeled the method by which Du Bois imagined the commerce between the black soul and the material world. Just as Rembrandt figured both high civilization and the humble folk, and just as Du Bois's proposed journal would both modernize race consciousness and broadcast that consciousness to the wider civilization, so did Du Bois poise the black soul between the sensory world of slavery and freedom, variously the object of uplift and the subject of its own creation.

This sensation of pure color had a special purpose for his audience who perhaps would not have had the chance to set foot in a European art gallery. In hearing about the burst of yellow light from the far-away painting, his audience would have been reminded at the scene with which Du Bois began his talk—the black home. In this address, Du Bois placed the home as the locus for the "training" in the appreciation of beauty of "the picture books of early years, the paintings in the parlor, the decorations of the bedroom." "How important then are the little decorations of home," he went on, "and how easily can a hideous combination of colors, or a tawdry picture make a man an aesthetic idiot." But aesthetic idiocy, for Du Bois and for his audience, had higher

¹⁰² Earlier in his address, Du Bois described an unnamed painting he saw at the National Galleries in Berlin: "It was a strange weird thing in grey and blue with great long-necked swans sailing down the river." Though not an accurate representation of swans, Du Bois argued, it nevertheless "succeeds in embodying a great idea, in creating a beautiful thing" (35).

stakes than bad taste. Gaining a sense of beauty was an essential part of “soul training” and the tasteful picture, the “right” sense of color were marks of racial progress. “[W]e as a people are just beginning to build our homes,” Du Bois told his audience, “and consequently many of us have missed the vast educational power of beautiful surroundings.”¹⁰³

While investigating “The Problem of Housing the Negro,” a five-part series written for largely black readership of the Hampton Institute’s *Southern Workman* in 1901, Du Bois joined a chorus of African American social reformers who saw in the home a locus for social development. The slave home was a blank space—“no books, no newspapers...no windows, no pictures”—and offered little direction for freed people as consumers or cultural practitioners following Emancipation.¹⁰⁴ With freedom, however, the rural black home had often degenerated into “ugly and repelling” forms: “Out of it are bound to come minds without a sense of color contrast, appropriateness in dress, or adequate appreciation of the beautiful world in which they live.” Though the freedman did not lack drive to decorate, in Du Bois’s estimation their efforts “usually lack[] taste and [are] overdone.” Among their aesthetic offenses were “rude” furniture, unmade beds, and “hand-bills and circus posters” on the walls.¹⁰⁵ Similar scenes and rhetoric that linked the sensorium of slavery to the material trappings of a new consumer culture reappeared in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In his chapters on the “Black Belt,” Du Bois recreated the shifting

¹⁰³ Du Bois, “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe,” 34.

¹⁰⁴ Du Bois, “The Problem of Housing the Negro,” pt. 2: “The Home of the Slave,” *Southern Workman* 30 (Sept 1901), 492. The essay would go on to narrate the history of colonial and antebellum slavery through the architecture and spatial relations of the plantation: the tight-knit household of colonial times, in Du Bois’s interpretation, giving way to the immense removal of slave quarters from the “Big House” with the acceleration of cotton production, removing “the worst side of the slave hierarchy far from the eyes of its better self” (490).

¹⁰⁵ Du Bois, “The Problem of Housing the Negro,” pt. 3: “The Home of the Country Freedman,” *Southern Workman* 30 (October 1901), 541-42. Subsequent installments—“The Home of the Village Negro” (*Southern Workman* 30 [November 1901], 601-4), “The Southern City Negro of the Lower Class” (*Southern Workman* 30 [December 1901], 688-93), and “The Southern City Negro of the Better Class” (*Southern Workman* 31 [February 1902], 65-72)—curiously did not attend to the interior decorations with the same concentration as the articles on the homes of slaves and freed people, suggesting Du Bois took the presence of beauty for granted the higher he ascended the social scale.

sensorium of African American life after slavery. In Dougherty County, Georgia, “a stray show-bill and newspapers make up the decorations on the walls”; in Tennessee, “there were bad chromos.”¹⁰⁶

Of course, the Rembrandt print Du Bois held aloft at Wilberforce was itself a chromolithograph. Du Bois did not dwell on this tension. If the Sorrow Song could be mass reproduced under the right conditions, what was a mass-reproduced image, whether art or advertisement, to the black soul? Indeed Du Bois chose the cover for *The Souls of Black Folk* not only to suit the title but to suit black souls with a graphic rhetoric that blended classicism and modernism.¹⁰⁷ The book design had specific meaning for black readers within a field of economic activity that contemporary economist Thorstein Veblen named “conspicuous consumption.” In his widely-read *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen, focusing his argument on the white upper classes, lampooned the cultural underpinning of the new business economy that prized a primitive striving for status through the manufacture and public display of “waste.” By making a show of their ability “to waste time and effort,” rather than the leisure class created canons of aesthetic taste to express their “pecuniary” power, an instrument to achieve social respectability which would be transmitted to a rising middle class and the “commercial aesthetic” of the new department store. Among the upper class’s penchants for the manicured garden and the purebred dog, Veblen found the essence of the absurdities of the consumer economy—a sign not of modern productive efficiency of industry but of the consumer’s power “to waste time and effort” for the sake of social respectability. Thus the hand-made books of William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, above all, with use of old-fashioned materials and the “elaborate ineptitude” of uncorrected page copy, were prized consumer items for the very

¹⁰⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, 139, 60.

¹⁰⁷ For the rhetoric of graphic design, see Johanna Drucker, “*Le Petit Journal des Refusées*: A Graphic Reading,” *Victorian Poetry* 48.1 (Spring 2010): 137-69.

reason they were so ostentatiously “defective”—an “impossib[ility] at a time when the visibly more perfect goods were not the cheaper.”¹⁰⁸

Yet *The Souls of Black Folk* was in many ways visibly closer to what Veblen called a “machine product,” its gilded titling and elegant edges mass-produced, “stamped up.” For Du Bois, the mass-produced classicism was part of the point. Indeed Du Bois adopted Veblen’s concept of the leisure class less to analyze the life of the black folk than to imagine their future.¹⁰⁹ But to the contrary of Veblen, and within the context of racial progress, Du Bois hailed the leisuring of the black folk precisely for furthering their “emancipation from the realm of utility.”¹¹⁰ In “The Negro As He Really Is,” which would be folded in to the Black Belt chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois imagined emancipation as a transformation from thing to a maker and consumer of things, from property to holder of property. Abolition was a “financial revolution” that turned \$2,500,000 worth of human property into indebted sharecroppers. By naming slave quarters not rustic “cabins” but “tenements,” furthermore, Du Bois framed status of

¹⁰⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899; new ed. New York: Macmillan, 1912), 161-165. However, Veblen sympathized with Morris’s idea that workmanship and labor were vital forms of self-expression at risk of loss in the age of the machine; he would visit Morris in England in 1896. See David Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen* (1953; new ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 58-59.

¹⁰⁹ We can only speculate whether Du Bois was reading Veblen at the time. Du Bois had two copies of Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* when his library was indexed in 193[?] and 195[?], both from the 1922 edition published by the Vanguard Press. Even though no private or public correspondence between them survives, intellectual historians have grouped the two together as social scientists committed to progressive social and economic reform. This is to say nothing of the equally tantalizing possibility that Veblen was reading Du Bois’s scholarly and literary essays published around the same time. See especially Boaz Nalika Namasaka, “William E. B. Du Bois and Thorstein B. Veblen: Intellectual Activists of Progressivism” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1971). Shamoan Zamir groups Veblen and Du Bois together (along with Franz Boas) not only for their intellectual affinities as social scientists but also as outsiders to the largely white, Protestant, and native-born field; see *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1880-1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 91-94. William W. Cook and James Tatum align Veblen’s lampooning of classical education (“this substantially useless information”) with Du Bois rather than Washington, who thought classical education for African Americans was useless, since Veblen’s satiric mode presupposes an acquaintance with the very canons of taste he analyzes; see *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 125-26.

¹¹⁰ The phrase belongs to Theodor W. Adorno, “Veblen’s Attack on Culture,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967), 75, whose critique of Veblen Du Bois might be said to have anticipated on the level of cultural practice rather than theory.

the present-day rural “Negro” within the vocabulary of urban reform.¹¹¹ Indeed, for Du Bois, the solution of the “race problem” lay not in tying black labor ever more closely to the land but in using the cotton economy to foster a rural black “leisure class,” furnishing croppers with higher wages to encourage “far more efficient work.” What was for Veblen a watchword of useless bourgeois decadence was for Du Bois a status that overcame the spiritual “heritage from slavery”: broken families, dilapidated cabins, and stunted cultural aims could be repaired with an infusion of income for black agricultural workers to “turn the bare...cabin into a home” and “hand down traditions from the past.” What made “a throbbing soul” as recognizably human “as you and I” was in no small part a creative agency over material surroundings.¹¹²

In his telling of post-Emancipation history, Du Bois returned to the book as a piece of matter rich with mutually transformative potential. With the federal government’s abandonment of Reconstruction in 1876, the freed people’s “dream of political power” was replaced with an ideal that bridged the civilized and the mystical:

It was the ideal of “book-learning”; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.¹¹³

For the freed black slave, in Du Bois’s imagining, books were a sign of freedom and a vehicle for its attainment. But they also represented a kind of material power; the “cabalistic letters”—whose graphic shape on the page corresponded to their aural tone and transcendent meaning—linked the freedom of physical movement with a spiritual command “to overlook life.” By returning to this experimental moment of black freedom, Du Bois momentarily made the book unfamiliar by having the reader consider it through the eyes of the freed black slave. The

¹¹¹ Du Bois, “The Negro as He Really Is,” 853.

¹¹² Du Bois, “The Negro as He Really Is,” *The World’s Work* (June 1901), 860, 857, 858.

¹¹³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 7.

unlettered freedman could handle a book in a way, say, the learned Bishop Onderdonk could not: he could translate its material properties into moral perception and historical action. For Du Bois, and for the black freedman, the possession and handling of the physical book stood not only for literacy but an expanded futurity which comes with freedom.

Although he might consign the black folk to a kind of “aesthetic idiocy,” throughout *Souls* Du Bois registered a different kind of intimacy with things, and a different transaction of sense, that arose from the black folk themselves. In “Of the Meaning of Progress,” first published in the *Atlantic* as “A Negro Schoolmaster in the New South” (1899), Du Bois remembered traveling as Fisk University student to the Tennessee countryside to work as a teach in summer school. Despite his pretenses to “uplift” the children of a benighted rural underclass, he recalled being bemused that the children do not so much look to “the wisdom of their teacher” but to the new thing he brought with them. In the clapboard schoolhouse, “nearly thirty of them, on the rough benches, their faces shading from a pale cream to a deep brown...the eyes full of expectation, with here and there a twinkle of mischief, and the hands grasping Webster’s blue-back spelling-book.”¹¹⁴

Perhaps Du Bois, too, had meant his black book to recall this elemental encounter with Webster’s blue speller.¹¹⁵ Yet the material integrity of the book and the black soul it meant to transmit could easily disintegrate across the threshold of exchange. Elia Peattie, literary reviewer for the *Tribune*, was well suited to judge *The Souls of Black Folk* on its political and artistic merits. Peattie was a member of the bohemian “Little Room” literary club as well as an active presence at Jane Addams’s Hull House; her career as a reformer and writer demonstrated her

¹¹⁴ Du Bois, “A Negro Schoolmaster in the New South,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (Jan. 1899), 101; identical passages in Du Bois, *Souls*, 65.

¹¹⁵ And perhaps also to recall Washington’s similar encounter with “Webster’s ‘blue-back’ speller,” which he recalled illicitly procured by his mother; *Up from Slavery*, 27.

attitude of inclusiveness to the cultures of Chicago's foreign born within the city's ethnic plurality. Appropriate to this sensibility, she opened her review of *The Souls of Black Folk* with Paul Laurence Dunbar's proclamation that Du Bois voiced the race itself—he "expresses us"—and evaluated the book on its claims to racial and cultural authority. Perhaps due to the reputation of its publisher and the tastefulness of its presentation, Peattie found the book to be literature in the highest form, distinguished from "books written from vanity or for the making of money, or from habit." And she followed Du Bois's argument that saw in the "Sorrow Songs" "a rune for people who have forgotten their greatness." Yet Peattie failed to see Du Bois's "rune" as a black book. "It is the white man in him" who quotes poetry and German philosophers, and even "who has taken the unwritten 'sorrow songs' of the African and caught their minor and melancholy cadences in the written note." Du Bois had succeeded in convincing this reviewer that African Americans had a culture, but not that African Americans could contribute to the national culture as African Americans.¹¹⁶

In an essay published in *The Independent* a year later, as a response to the book's national reception, Du Bois conceded that the book's difficult style lent it a "sense of incompleteness and sketchiness." But he also defended the book's "unity of purpose," to express a distinctly black world from the perspective of those "who dwell therein." As if in response to Peattie's criticism that it was "the white man in him" authoring his prose, Du Bois turned to the material trope of blood to defend his style, "tropical—African":

This needs no apology. The blood of my fathers spoke through me and cast off the English restraint of my training and surroundings. The resulting accomplishment is a matter of taste. Sometimes I think very well of it, and sometimes I do not.

¹¹⁶ Elia W. Peattie, "Souls of Black Men," *Chicago Tribune* (2 May 1903), 17. For Peattie, see Timothy Spears, *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 184-98.

On one hand, Du Bois left no doubt about what he considered the material origin of his work—the very “blood” of his African American, even African, heritage. On the other hand, he distanced himself from the “resulting” book; his experimental blending fell short of capturing “The Thing itself,” for “dressed...out in periods it seems fearfully uncouth and inchoate.”¹¹⁷

This was the dilemma of double consciousness articulated in the literary marketplace. He returned to the scene again in the novel he denied Page and gave to McClurg & Co., *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Here Du Bois recast the cultural economy of black souls in the classical legend of Jason’s Quest for the Golden Fleece. Not gold, but cotton weaves together the mythic lives of Southern landholders, Northern capitalists, and African American sharecroppers. Zora shoos away a “Brer Rabbit” from her cotton patch, and becomes spiritually diminished when she follows a Bookerite “Way” of thrift.

She worked it over faithfully and lovingly in every spare hour and in long nights of dreaming. Willfully she departed from the set pattern and sewed into the cloth something of the beauty of her heart. In new and intricate ways, with soft shadowings and coverings, she wove in that white veil her own strange soul....¹¹⁸

Here Du Bois hearkened back to the figure of the “Veil” in the “Strivings” essay 14 years before. As Brad Evans shows, the metaphor of the veil was refined to describe the “two-ness” of black subjectivity in a material object: the cotton fleece was “transformed by Zora’s conjured, exotic soul into a cultural commodity,” complete with *art nouveau* flourishes, not only weaving together black labor with “Southern cotton and Northern industry” but also African American folklore with global commodity culture.¹¹⁹ It thus also marked the reappearance of *The Souls of Black Folk* itself. Despite his public posture as a race leader who would uplift the lower orders of

¹¹⁷ Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” *The Independent* 57 (17 Nov 1904), 1152.

¹¹⁸ Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece: A Novel* (1911; New York: Harlem Moon, 2004), 194-95.

¹¹⁹ As Evans notes, Du Bois links Zora’s veil to the incongruous appearance in the novel of a Japanese vase associated at once with gauche commodity culture and with worldly aesthetic value. Evans, *Before Cultures*, 176-85, quotation on 182.

his race, whether through aesthetic taste or economic uplift, Du Bois projected onto the black folk the activity he himself was engaging in as a writer and as a commercial artist. It sketches, above all, a rough, provisional, and nonetheless critical sense of freedom. Freed from their status of objecthood, black souls tested the limits of their freedom by transforming the material world to suit themselves.

VI. The Black Reconstruction of American Culture

Contemporary African American readers handled *The Souls of Black Folk* as a sacred text and beautiful thing. The *Broad Ax*, a Chicago-based black newspaper that championed the book's anti-Washington stance, did not fail to notice the book's handsome presentation, "printed on fine Aberdeen book paper with bold face type."¹²⁰ As its reputation among black readers grew, Du Bois's "little book" became synonymous with the race itself. For James Weldon Johnson *The Souls of Black Folk* "had a greater effect upon and within the Negro race in America than any other single book published in this country since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."¹²¹ Critic William Stanley Braithwaite elaborated on this "effect": the book "profoundly influenced the spiritual temper of the race" because it contained its own spiritual power to enchant empirical reality: "a painful book, a book of tortured dreams woven into the fabric of the sociologist's document."¹²² Even as early as 1913, itinerant theologian and Pan-Africanist William Ferris projected onto the book a

¹²⁰ "'The Souls of Black Folk' by Prof. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois," *Broad Ax* (2 May 1903), 1. The Indianapolis *Freeman* praised *Souls* on similar terms, though it gave more attention to Du Bois's experimental literary style—the "history, song, panegyric of the race"—and also considered the book itself as part of its racial meaning: "the book must be *seen* and read to be appreciated." "Souls of Black Folk," *Freeman* (Indianapolis) (9 May 1903), 4 (emphasis added).

¹²¹ James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (1933; New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 203. Johnson was amplifying praise he gave to *The Souls of Black Folk* in his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; New York: Vintage, 1989): that "remarkable book by Dr. Du Bois" represented a "beginning" for the "future Negro novelist and poet" (168-69).

¹²² William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1925; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 40.

sacred aura and metaphysical presence (“the political bible of the Negro race,” a “bolt from the blue”) which transcended the plane of secular history to religious parable—Du Bois the David against the Goliath of “race prejudice,” the author wielding his book like a “sling and five pebbles.” In this imagining, the black cover dissolved in the text’s transformative magic, but returned in the physical substance of black personhood: “proclaim[ing] in thunder tones and in words of magic beauty the worth and sacredness of human personality even when clothed in a black skin.”¹²³ While these remarks connect the book to the trope of the “talking book” which has organized African American literary expression since the slave narratives, and liken it to *Uncle Tom* and the bible as a spiritual object with command over the course of history, they also begin to suggest how *The Souls of Black Folk* gained its reputation not simply within the abstract spaces of a literary canon or a philosophical tradition but within the firmament of an African American sensorium.

Recently historians, critics, and makers of African-American art have likewise turned to material culture in order to dramatize a critical connection—sometimes figurative, sometimes literal—between the historical enslavement of black human beings and the exploitation of blackness in present-day commodity culture and art markets.¹²⁴ For Du Bois, however, the material commodity represented neither a “final” product nor an insurgent return of a repressed economic base—or physical reality—that would reify the soul it contained. Rather he sought to deliver with his book a sense of power over the political economy of things. It was with this

¹²³ William Ferris, *The African Abroad, or His Evolution in Western Civilization: Tracing His Development under Caucasian Milieu*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn.: The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Press, 1913), 1:276, 273. Ferris goes on to describe his personal transformation, indeed his rebirth, wrought by *Souls* along with Carlyle’s “Heroes and Hero Worship” and “Sartor Resartus,” and Emerson’s “Nature and Other Addresses.” Encountering them as an undergraduate and graduate student at Yale, Ferris recalled that “the reading of these three books were epochs and crucial moments in my moral and spiritual life. Henceforth the world was a different world for me. They revealed to me my own spiritual birthright, showed that there was a divine spark in every soul, and that God was manifest in every human soul and breathed his own nature into every human soul” (1:273).

¹²⁴ See Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

sense that a contemporary reader affixed a postcard of Du Bois's portrait into the frontispiece of the book, compensating for the missing authorial photograph (fig. 2.5). And it is with this sense that the present-day African American artist Rashid Johnson has refashioned *The Souls of Black Folk* amid the bric-a-brac of a futuristic African American life. Bearing a likeness to the bookshelves displayed in the American Negro Exhibit in Paris in 1900, Johnson's *The Souls of Black Folk* does not map an upward of progress but rather a more complex collage of past and future, and rows and rows of *Souls* in mass-produced green hardcover books joined by plants and gold rocks to frame a hieroglyph that signifies a history lost and a future found (fig. 2.6). "These are specimens from a world that has yet to materialize," as critic Ian Bourland writes, "populated by subjects we have yet to become."¹²⁵ But a future of mass consumerism that in this case Du Bois himself had foreseen and attempted to bring the race into, not only as "co-workers" but also as its human redeemers.

More immediately, Du Bois's was a minority voice that failed to halt the ongoing transformation of black souls into dead matter. Yet his countermemory and countermaterialism raises new questions about the value of race for capitalism. Rather than draw equation between commodity status of slaves and commodity status of blackness in consumer society, an assumption that carries its own ahistoricity, Du Bois put in relief the sites of cultural economy, of production and marketing, in which the material status of African Americans was reproduced into a new machine age. How was the value of race recreated for this new consumer society? What use did these spectacles, stories, and images of slavery have for the moderns who bought it up?

¹²⁵ Ian Bourland, "The Brother from Another Planet," in Kate Steinmann, Sarah Kramer, and Molly Zimmerman-Feeley, eds., *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 48.

3.

SEEING SLAVERY

W. E. B. Du Bois would render his historical conception of the black soul not only in a book but in the most powerful medium of social representation of the day: the photograph. In *Negro Life in Georgia, U.S.A.* and *Types of American Negroes, Georgia, U.S.A.*, Du Bois compiled photographs solicited from around Georgia to display in the American Negro Exhibit at the Exhibition Universelle in Paris, 1900. While in *Types* he showcased Thomas E. Askew's idealized portraits of Atlanta's black middle class, in *Life* he presented landscapes that were more precariously poised between past and present: telephone wires crossing above a bare farmhouse, gangs of convict laborers laying concrete roadbeds, and other superimpositions of modern development over signs of the past. Du Bois likely chose such scenes to displace the causes of black poverty and abjection from race to environment, from the old plantation to the political economy of the New South, from myth to history, to emphasize the work needed to repair the nation's modern course. He designed this view as one component of a three-dimensional display of racial progress that comprised "all the usual paraphernalia for catching the eye—photographs, models, industrial work, and pictures."¹

As he would later lament, Du Bois had failed to catch that eye. Whereas Du Bois had attempted to dismantle the old plantation myth so that the nation might see the black soul face-to-face, and heart-to-heart, the photographic trades recuperated that myth to shape and broadcast a different sensation of renewal. In thousands upon thousands of stereographs, postcards,

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The American Negro in Paris," in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, vol. 1: 1891-1909 (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1982), 87. The article was originally published in *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 22 (Nov. 1900), 575-77, and under the title, "Sociological Exhibit of American Negroes," *Public Opinion* (Nov. 15, 1900). Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 93-99.

snapshots, and other photographic forms, photographers transformed the visual scene of the contemporary south—ruined plantations, sites of former slave markets and auction houses, portraits of the formerly enslaved, and landscapes of “negroes” tending to cotton fields—and turned them into picturesque visual commodities. In effect they attempted to see through the contingencies of history to bring a “lost” past back to the modern sensorium. Thus they provided an alluring visual stage for their primary consumers, the white Northern middle class, to sync their progress to that of the nation, for they enabled you to imbibe the picturesque flavor of the plantation while marking your increasing distance from the eradicated slave regime.

But how to recoup the mythic Old South without seeing slavery in the frame of progress? Take, for a moment, a postcard that a tourist in Richmond sent to one Lizzie Fritchie in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. The postcard was a black and white view of the Shenandoah Hotel with the Lee Monument in the foreground (fig. 3.1). The monument had only recently been completed and materialized a view of the New South in which the memory of slavery was, as Kirk Savage argues, a “controlling absence.” General Lee projected the visage of chivalric Southern white manhood from the Confederate past into the American future of commerce and urban development—a purposeful skip over the Lost Cause of slavery and secession for which Lee fought.² Although the politics of the memory of Civil War remained raw for many in the North and South, such monuments and their mass photographic reproduction marked a rising spirit of reconciliation. Indeed this Northern visitor was eager to convey a family tie to the scene. “My Brother in law mother own this building [sic],” the tourist scrawled overtop the photograph. He delivered the origin of the hotel owner’s wealth with a mix of pride and irreverence: “Pin Money Pickles.” The writer was alluding to Ellen G. Kidd, who had begun selling her pickles to

² Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 130-31.

neighbors for “pin money” during Reconstruction and now oversaw their manufacture at a rate of 1,000 barrels of pickles per day in a nearby factory. From her residence that commanded the hotel’s entire sixth floor, she managed their sale to major buyers, from the Pullman Company to upscale Manhattan restaurants.³ The tourist’s message and the photograph coalesced into an idealized vision of the New South: Southern goods (not just pickles) would circulate around the nation while Northern capitalists and tourists (and their pin money) would enrich a forward-looking Southern economy.

By 1903, picture postcards (more than pickles) were a key part of the circulation of goods and money that provided the material underpinnings for the nation’s postbellum reunion. Their postmarks and addresses trace routes from New Orleans to Manhattan, Mississippi to Massachusetts. This mass movement of images from South to North can be seen as a cultural analogue to the trade in Southern cotton, itself rendered more abstract as the financiers of the New York Cotton Exchange cared less about the physical stuff than in the price the commodity might fetch in the future. That many postcards represented scenes of the Southern cotton economy demonstrate their ideological function for the New South: just as photographs of Richmond hotels and Confederate heroes could erase slavery from the scene, so too photographs of the rural countryside sanitized the industrializing cotton economy as a timeless preserve of a pastoral plantation. On the one hand, slavery was forgotten. On the other hand, the memory of slavery, softened by the aura of the Old South, provided an alibi for the resubjugation of African American agricultural laborers under the sharecropping regime that emerged after the collapse of

³ Unknown to Miss Lizzie Fritchie, Nov. 23, 1910; The Shenandoah, Richmond, Va. with Lee Monument (n.p., n.d.), in Postcards, Graphic Arts Collection, American Antiquarian Society (Post-AAS). For Kidd, see “Sweet Pickles Her Fortune: From Small Cucumbers a Big Business Grows,” *Los Angeles Times* (Oct. 3, 1913), p. II6; <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=20831631> (accessed Feb. 12, 2015); Larry Hall, “Pin Money Pickles Turned Woman’s Skill into Empire,” *Richmond Times Dispatch* (Aug. 3, 2005), B5; <http://www.richmondbizsense.com/2014/12/15/new-owners-rejuvenate-fan-senior-residence/>. The census tells us that Lizzie Fritchie was 34 years old and lived with her parents, Edward and Louise, who emigrated from Germany in 1865. Thirteenth US Census (1910), McKeesport Ward 7, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

Reconstruction. Slavery had only been a temporary “fly-wheel” in the development of a dynamic plantation “machine,” wrote Southern historian and ideologue Ulrich B. Phillips in 1905.⁴ At the centerpiece of this machine was the work of the “negro,” displacing African Americans from the history of slavery and emancipation to a timeless racial status, for coercion could not exist when its labor force was “naturally” attuned to picking cotton.⁵

But what drove Northern consumers to buy up such visions of slavery? What desires did it fulfil and what uses did it perform? What extra value did a photograph of the Hermitage plantation home give to a tourist writing back home to Cambridge, or a sight of a black cotton picker to a collector in Los Angeles? Whereas previous historians have explained the Northern investment in the imagery of the Old South as a reflection of antimodernist nostalgia or capitulation to Southern Jim Crow, I consider such imagery as it was developed into photographs. Strictly speaking, photographic development was a discrete process: after being exposed to light, photographic film is treated by chemicals to produce a permanent image, a positive or negative reflection of the original exposure. Yet this process would vary not only with the advancement of photographic technology. As scholars of photography have shown, photographs develop within wider cultural processes that mark the photographic image with particular and often fungible values, uses, and meanings. Indeed the cultural processes could interfere with the chemical processes. The Lee Monument, for instance, is dwarfed by the Shenandoah in actual physical scale. The local photographer noticed this incongruity, too, and overcompensated by enlarging the monument beyond its natural proportions, either by foreshortening the view in the camera or splicing Lee and the Shenandoah together in the

⁴ Ulrich B. Phillips, “The Economic Cost of Slaveholding,” *Political Science Quarterly* 20.2 (June 1905), 257, 275.

⁵ For an illuminating historical analysis of the ideological production of the “negro” in the political economy of the global cotton economy, see Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

darkroom. The surreal juxtaposition fit the New South message. What did it convey to Lizzie in McKeesport?

This chapter will depart from the Shenandoah to concentrate on the development of photographs that were composed more deliberately to construct a sensation of progress out of figures of “negroes” and “timeless” plantation landscapes. Yet that postcard opens a view onto the material conditions and discourses that shaped how Americans used photography to recuperate race as a part of their daily lives. Hence this chapter takes the perspective of the white Northerners who sought out, produced, fretted over, and consumed sights of slavery, whether on the road, in their hands, or in their mind’s eye. It does so in five parts that each trace how the memory of slavery was given visual construction within a different text: Henry James’s *American Scene* (1907); Julian Ralph’s travelogue *Dixie* (1895); Rudolf Eickemeyer’s *Down South* (1900); Mildred Cram’s literary memoir *Old Southern Seaports* (1917); and the personal messages written on the versos of postcards sent northward from 1899 to the 1930s. Spanning genres of travelogue, memoir, photobook, and correspondence, these texts put the consumer into the production processes of selling slavery, for they dramatized how the visual scene compelled the viewer’s cognitive labor to produce its promised sensation. What emerged was less a quenching of nostalgic yearning than a persistent effort to sanctify the nation’s progress; less an achievement of the picturesque than an emergence of modernism; less a passive consumption of Southern racism than an active production of value around the black image by and for Northern consumers.

I. Slavery in the American Scene

On a snowy day in Richmond, Virginia, Henry James looked for history and saw nothing. Like the thousands of northern tourists who stopped at Richmond on their way to warm winter resorts further along in Georgia and Florida, James yearned to be “romantically affected” by the atmosphere of the Old South that he hoped would reach his eyes in 1904. He was primed for the experience more than most. After living nearly a quarter-century in England, James returned “with much freshness of the eye” to investigate and represent the “human scene” of the United States.⁶ It had been the thinness of the “scene” that had prompted his decisive emigration. “[I]t takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature,” James explained in 1879; “it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion.”⁷ James would fail in his attempt to wrench from the Southern landscape a productive history and animating social machinery. His desire for a romantic past was frustrated by an American paradox: the nation’s richest historical ground had been forged by the “folly” of slavery. In the contours of his failure, however, James opens a view onto the problem slavery posed for the white Yankee middle class—a problem of history that he attempted to reconcile by straining his vision.

At issue for James in the winter of 1904 was the historical substance of modern America, a category at once historical and aesthetic. In James’s pursuit of historical grounding to render an American scene, he sought an aesthetic form that could represent the acceleration of history that marked the contemporary moment. When he toured his native Manhattan, for instance, James’s eye strained to catch up to a history that was being demolished in the name of progress—the

⁶ Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (1907; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 367, xxv, xxvi. My reading of *The American Scene* follows from Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 257-63; Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), chap. 1.

⁷ Henry James, Jr., *Hawthorne* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1879), 3.

incessant replacement of the old by the new symbolized above all by the skyscraper, that “monster[] of the mere market.” In the South, with its “latent poetry,” James expected to imbibe the romantic tragedy of the Lost Cause, “such a stored, such a waiting provision of vivid images, mostly beautiful and sad.” It was not only a great deal of history but also a familiar picturesque aesthetic with which to see the past from a modern vantage. But if James “had counted on a sort of registered consciousness of the past” to appear across the Mason-Dixon line, he instead saw a wintry “desert” spread out before Richmond’s “great modern hotel.” The South had been spared neither by Northern weather nor by the market’s monsters; not even James’s astute eye could penetrate the blizzard. “The truth was that there appeared, for the moment, on the face of the scene, no discernible consciousness, registered or unregistered of anything,” he lamented. It was “simply blank and void.”⁸

The transatlantic novelist was far from your typical Yankee tourist. Yet his loquacious description—as much of his own cognitive powers as of the scene itself—compassed the conflicting desires and incomplete resolutions that shaped how his contemporaries looked for slavery. Once he perceived that “the large, sad poorness was in itself a reference,” James was overwhelmed by the vision of “the old Southern idea—the largest fallacy as it hovered to one’s backward ranging vision, for which hundreds of thousands of men had ever laid down their lives.” If in Manhattan James’s capacity for historical perception stopped short at the skyscraper, here it recoiled at the sight of slavery itself:

I was tasting of the very bitterness of the immense, grotesque, defeated project—the project, extravagant, fantastic, and to-day pathetic in its folly, of a vast Slave State (as the old term ran) artfully, savingly isolated in the world that was to contain it and trade with it.⁹

⁸ James, *The American Scene*, 80, 370.

⁹ James, *The American Scene*, 371.

For James, who had been brought up in an antebellum Boston riven by the politics of anti-slavery, slavery was an aberration in the history of civilization. The modern South could not fully represent its past because it was rooted in this historic “folly.” In the same move, however, James also sought to “artfully, savingly” isolate the civilized world that had indeed contained and traded with King Cotton, while disassociating himself from the “immense, grotesque, defeated project.” Thus James’s desire for history in the South ran aground on a moral precept not only of old abolitionism but of the modern ideology of progress: the incompatibility of human commodification and coerced labor with the expansion of individual freedom promised by liberal democracy and industrial capitalism.¹⁰ James felt the ideological problem of American history on the level of aesthetic perception. How could American moderns imbibe the romantic atmosphere of the Old South without themselves being tainted by the bitter “taste” of slavery? Indeed, what made the historic Southern scene such an attractive prop for modern self-fashioning?

Whatever “sensation of ‘the South before the War’” that James sought, it would inevitably “collaps[e] even as I stood there.” It wilted under the incommensurable weight of both the legacy of slavery and the march of progress. In a Charleston museum, for instance, James felt the past itself especially out of reach however “prismatically” the souvenirs and trinkets advertised an “‘old’ South.” Yet at the museum he could not help but be drawn to the face of an elderly black woman. He was especially beguiled

by the mere magic of the manner in which a small, scared, starved person of colour, of very light colour, an elderly mulatress in an improvised wrapper, just barely held open for me a door through which I felt I might have looked straight and far back into the past. The past, that of the vanished order, was hanging on there behind her—as much as the scant place would accommodate; and she knew this, and that I had so quickly guessed it; which led her, in fine, before I could see more, and that I might not sound the secret of shy misfortune, of faded pretension, to shut the door in my face.¹¹

¹⁰ See David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹¹ James, *The American Scene*, 403.

What the woman crystalized was James's impossible desire: to revive the authentic cultural values and romantic aura of the Old South without the taint of slavery. Throughout his narrative he traced back to slavery the "artlessly perverse" quality of Southern culture, the "inimitable rococo note" of its architecture, the "monomania" of the Confederacy, the emptiness of its "modernism."¹² Even though James generated a pathos of "tenderness" for the "beaten and bruised" whites by entertaining the view of "Southern eyes," "strange eyes," he looked down on their mementoes of the Lost Cause as fetishes of "lone and primitive islanders."¹³ Such fetishism took the form, James noticed, in the "primitive products of the camera" sold at the Confederate museum in Richmond, and the photographs sold by "the old mutilated Confederate soldier" in the public library.¹⁴ But for James no modern relic was more paradoxical than the "thumping legacy of the intimate presence of the negro," at once appearing "ragged and rudimentary, yet all portentous and 'in possession of his rights as a man.'"¹⁵

But if James meant to contrast his eye from the Southern eye, at once primitive and photographic, then he also betrayed his own immersion not in the past but in a present where vision was being transformed along with the social experience that vision mediated. For James, the modern hotels and railroads were spaces of social commerce newly "managed" by principles of efficiency and spectatorship. The Pullman luxury railcar exemplified the new social experience furnished in these spaces. On his way to Charleston, James himself adopted a view from the "car window": the "awful modern privilege of the detached yet concentrated state at the misery of subject populations." Despite his aversion to the poor whites who lacked "personality" and the blacks who "didn't care for themselves" (compared to the "care" they received from the

¹² James, *The American Scene*, 374, 419

¹³ James, *The American Scene*, 374-75, 377.

¹⁴ James, *The American Scene*, 385.

¹⁵ James, *The American Scene*, 375.

car-window observer), James continued, perversely, to be drawn to them as “traces” of the past.¹⁶ Later, in the Richmond museum, James was quick to distinguish his gaze from any form of real violence, such as the violence implied by the “son of the new South” who was also “a fine contemporary young American, incapable, so to speak, of hurting a Northern fly”; he nevertheless alarmed James to think that “there were things...that, all fair, engaging, smiling...he would have done to a Southern negro.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, as he continued his Southern journey, James registered a monstrous urge behind his desire for historical grounding in the scene. “I was to find myself, in the South and in the most monstrous fashion,” he wrote, “those aspects in which the consequence of the great fallacy were...still trace-able; I was cold-bloodily to prefer them, that is, to the aspects, occasionally to be met, from which the traces had been removed.”¹⁸

What began for James as a pursuit for a new historic foundation for American culture in the South ended with a “cold-blooded” quest to redeem the modern American scene with a fantasy of the old plantation. It was a quest motivated not only by an ideal sensation of the past but for compensation of the dislocations felt by the modern tourist. He was subject to the oversight of Pullman cars and hotels and yet “perfectly isolated” and “unservanted,” “with nobody to warm or comfort me, with nobody even to command.”¹⁹ It was for this alienating feeling of freedom without mastery that he most strongly yearned to reinstitute something like slavery itself, as if to correct the “inimitable detachment” of a Pullman porter who put James’s bag “straight down into the mud of the road” or a hotel waiter who “scarce waits...for your leave.” Yet again and again the memory of the old plantation—“the house alive with the scramble of young darkies for the honour of fetching and carrying”—would give way to its

¹⁶ James, *The American Scene*, 397-98.

¹⁷ James, *The American Scene*, 387, 388-89.

¹⁸ James, *The American Scene*, 404; Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation*, 158-62.

¹⁹ James, *The American Scene*, 400.

“melancholy ghost” in freedom.²⁰ As Sara Blair observes, perhaps the greatest oversight in James’s impressions of the South is his blindness to black porters and waiters as fellow resisters to the “management” of the Pullman Company; he was unable to find common cause between his free-ranging eye and the marginal freedoms eked out by African Americans in the corporate industrial economy.²¹ To reclaim a sense of freedom in travel meant to wish for something like slavery to undergird it, even as one damned its heritage.

Yet James also reveals the productive energies behind his blind nostalgia. James could see in the modern emptiness of Richmond the “grandly sad” reference to slavery because he could “read into” the view, as an investor “spend[s]” on a stock to “make it pay.” The resulting sight of the Old South was “a preliminary discharge...of some brisk shower of general ideas.” Shifting metaphors from the literary to the financial to the onanistic, James recovered the bittersweet “memoires and penalties” of slavery from the blank modern scene as an achievement of a profitable and pleasurable self-production. What he recovered, however, was “the conception that, almost comic in itself, was yet so tragically to fail to work, that of a world rearranged, a State solidly and comfortably seated and tucked-in, in the interest of slave-produced Cotton.” Yet James, too, sought to arrange the American scene into a coherent vision from “the solidity and the comfort” of his car window. Even as he recoiled from “the complete intellectual, moral and economic reconsecration of slavery” that “enlarged and glorified, quite beautified...its principle” of human bondage, his self-indulgence merged with that of the failed slave system. Because “nothing in the Slave-scheme could be said to conform...to the reality of things,” the Southern mind had to rewrite “the history of everything” to make their world accord with the trend of human progress, from the “bowdlerization of books and journals” to the

²⁰ James, *The American Scene*, 423.

²¹ Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation*, 201.

expurgation of “all literature and all art.”²² By blinding themselves to history—the South to the history of civilization, James to the history of African Americans—they were free to create a more beautiful sense of the past.

Thus James confronted a dilemma. As James had sought to distinguish his productive self-investment in the scene from the New South “propaganda” in Richmond and Charleston museums, he yearned not simply for the “negro” as a lost form of social support but also for a new art that could distinguish his productive investment in the picturesque South from the beatification of slavery. The problem that James sketched in his rarefied discourse would be answered by more quotidian cultural practitioners as they attempted to produce a vision of the Old South out of the modern landscape while keeping the history of slavery behind them. Yet rather than rely on their minds to do the work, they turned to a new technology of visual cognition: the camera.

II. Progress, the Picturesque, and the Snapshot of Modern Life

With the extension of rail and, after the turn of the century, the advent of the automobile and the development of highways, a growing number of the white middle-class Northerners began to vacation in the former Confederacy for its climate, its languid pace of life, its humble folk, and above all its historic atmosphere—a structure of aesthetic feeling then described as “picturesque.” Those without the means to travel could enjoy the picturesque vicariously through stereographs, illustrated travelogues, and other visual ephemera; indeed, travelers likely set out to see a “Dixie” that stage shows like *Black America* had already placed in their minds’ eye. What gave the picturesque its mass appeal was its visible contrast to the signs of material progress, the skyscrapers, streetcars, sprawling communities of “alien” immigrant laborers, and

²² James, *The American Scene*, 372-74.

other sensations of the urban industrial economy that made life seem “unreal” in northeastern cities. Above all, the picturesque South offered refuge for Northerners in the old plantation, where absolute differences of time, region, and race coalesced in the figure of the “negro.” Out of such symbolic material the formerly warring sections could reconcile based on precepts of industrial capitalism and white supremacy. Just as Northern capital eyed the Southern plantation economy for its cotton crop and seemingly docile labor force, so did Northern viewers parse the Southern landscape and its human figures to reconcile their nation’s future course with one of its most contested pasts. Yet the result would not simply be nostalgic reverie of an old plantation, but dreams of progress troubled by darker visions of racial extermination.

To fix the picturesque plantation within the scene of their modern life, they turned to the camera. As early as 1888, popular fiction author Lizzie W. Champney could easily imagine a Vassar student on her winter vacation “[finding] opportunity to use her camera, and obtained a number of new Florida types,—negroes busily lading the boat or lazily looking on.”²³ The author could not have drawn a clearer contrast between the Florida “negroes” who vacillated between “busily” working and “lazily looking on” and the white Vassar student’s active leisure in using her camera and obtaining racial “types.” As the “negroes” served to typify a natural form of work, the Vassar student and her camera symbolized a new form of autonomous visual production: the snapshot. The student brought her “detective camera” to take “instantaneous views.” Indeed the violence of the imposition of the camera onto the picturesque scene was suggested by the frontispiece of the book, which paired one Vassar girl aiming her camera at an alligator (another local “type”) with another aiming a handgun. The work of picture-taking was as immediate as that other contemporary emblem of American mass production, the single-action

²³ Lizzie W. Champney, *Three Vassar Girls at Home; A Holiday Trip of Three College Girls through the South and West* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1888), 102; also quoted in Silber, *Romance of Reunion*, 78.

revolver.²⁴ With this scene, the book premeditated a new way of producing memory that was only beginning to be mass marketed by George Eastman that year.

The camera did not merely document the picturesque scene; it actively burnished the modernity of the picture taker. It only took a decade for Eastman to make his push-button machine a part of everyday American life: in 1889, the Kodak No. 1 cost \$400 and weighed 2 pounds, selling no more than 3,250 that year; by 1895, the Pocket Kodak cost \$5 and sold 25,000; by 1900, the Brownie cost \$1 and sold 150,000. Once they had filled their pre-loaded film cartridge, Kodak customers sent their cameras to Eastman's factory in Rochester, New York, where the film was developed and mounted into photographs. "You press the button, we do the rest," ran one ad for Kodak's No. 1.²⁵ In advertisements that showed picture takers on vacation, capturing family moments in picturesque natural settings, Eastman framed his product as an accessory to leisurely consumption and escape, a "set of codes and images aimed at celebrating the nostalgic pursuit of beauty, pleasure, and innocence."²⁶ But as Walter Benjamin would observe in 1939, the ease of pushbutton technology ironically brought "those enjoying it closer to mechanization." It was not simply that the button-pusher now participated in a photographic industry that looped back to Eastman's factories in Rochester, New York; moreover, the hand-held camera integrated the eye into the staccato pace of modern life. If "a touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time," then the "camera gave the moment a posthumous shock." Indeed the camera was a piece of the "series of shocks and collisions" of

²⁴ Champney, *Three Vassar Girls*, 113, 22, frontispiece. Indeed her snapshot of these Florida "types" frames the student's encounter with a white stranger whose only experience with photography had been with tin-types and so marveled at her new device: "He could not understand the instantaneous process, and certain views of persons and animals in motion puzzled him" (102). Solnit, *River of Shadows*, 117-18.

²⁵ For the cultural history of the snapshot and the technological history of the camera, I rely on Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000). See also Todd Gustavson, *500 Cameras: 170 Years of Photographic Innovation* (New York: Sterling Signature, 2011), 96-100, 103-4, 107, 111-12; Taft, *Photography and the American Scene*, chap. 19.

²⁶ West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, 5.

urban modernity, from electric lights to trolley cars, which excited the senses. Thus Kodak's Brownies became the ideal device for people to make visual sense of the "shock" of modernity itself, whether to visually master the bustle of the street or memorialize the technological ruins created by the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.²⁷

What did it mean to take a snapshot of the picturesque South? How would it order race and region in the temporality of national progress? The effort received no larger hearing and produced no greater optical strain than in the person of Julian Ralph (1853-1903) and his widely read travelogue, *Dixie; or, Southern Scenes and Sketches* (1896). Although not remembered today, at the turn of the century Ralph was widely celebrated for his travel journalism. He made his name as the foreign correspondent for *Harper's Monthly* and his obituary noted his travelogues from China to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.²⁸ Ralph was beloved not only as a New Yorker born and raised, a solid stand-in for the American abroad. He was read as a human Kodak. With *Dixie*, a collection of travel essays published serially in *Harper's Monthly*, readers saw a herald of the South's incorporation into the mainstream of American history. "Ralph is an optimist," chimed the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for he "sees much in the South to encourage the hope of permanent growth and development."²⁹ And he could see because he absorbed everything around him, according to the *New York Times*. "The man who talks with everybody and listens to everybody, the man whom everybody calls a good fellow, is...the very sort of man to send out to describe a country, its institutions, and people."³⁰ The book thus was praised not simply as a travel memoir but as a snapshot. According to the *Boston Traveler*, in a blurb that Harper & Brothers reproduced in their advertisements for the book,

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 174-75; and see Yablon, *Untimely Ruins*, 213-15.

²⁸ "Death of Julian Ralph," *New York Times* (Jan. 21, 1903), 2.

²⁹ "Julian Ralph's Dixie," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Dec. 15, 1895), 4.

³⁰ Review of Julian Ralph, *Dixie: or, Southern Scenes and Sketches*, in *New York Times* (Dec. 1, 1895), 31.

Ralph was a “model traveller” who “keeps both eyes open, and sees...things, which the average tourist misses.”³¹ *The Literary World* likened Ralph’s book to “an instantaneous photography of contemporary life in the Southern states.”³² The *New York Times* praised Ralph for a prose style that was both “swinging” and “picturesque and natural,” a combination of modern immediacy and nostalgic haze that could only have one analogue: it was “as through the persons and things described had been photographed in the author’s mind and prints had been made up from the negatives without touching up.”³³

Ralph’s *Dixie* has largely been read by historians as an example of the antimodernist nostalgia that drove harried urbanites to temporary reprieve in the Sunny South. But Ralph and his photographic eye staged a more fluid dialectic between the progressive North and the picturesque South: as Northerners sought to consume the nostalgia and romance of Dixie, so did they approach the South as a setting to express and unfold the modern. Undoubtedly, the New Yorker enjoyed being “undisturbed by telegraph or telephone, a hotel elevator or clanging cable car, surrounded by comfort...and at liberty to forget the rush and bustle of that raging monster which the French call the *fin-de-siècle*.”³⁴ At the same time, what drove Ralph southward was a desire to reconcile the “raging monster” of progress into the picturesque frame. For this, Ralph developed a style of seeing that matched the camera’s attunement to the flux of impressions without succumbing to the camera’s mechanical “shocks.” To be sure, for many turn-of-the-century Americans, the “shock” of the instant camera registered as a kind of bodily contagion or nervous addiction, as Ralph himself put it. Although he too would have been “tempted to photograph” the picturesque trees weighted with Spanish moss, Ralph distinguished himself

³¹ Advertisement for Julian Ralph, *Dixie*, in *Harper’s Bazaar* (Dec. 14, 1895), 1027.

³² Review of Julian Ralph, *Dixie: or, Southern Scenes and Sketches*, in *The Literary World* 26 (Nov. 30, 1895), 425.

³³ Review of Ralph, *Dixie*, in *New York Times*.

³⁴ Julian Ralph, *Dixie; or, Southern Scenes and Sketches* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895), 1.

from “persons afflicted with the fever for kodaking everything out-of-doors.”³⁵ Instead Ralph constructed his vision as active and productive; he recorded the scene in all of its picturesqueness while energizing it with a sense of imminent futurity. When he arrived at Charleston, for instance, he could hardly believe his eyes: “a water-color city of reds and pinks and soft yellows and white set against abundant greenery.”³⁶ By the end of his account, however, he urged his eye to see beyond the nostalgic haze. He adopted the vision of the city’s business class, “tired of ‘fighting the war over again,’” and isolated from the nation’s rail networks. “The hope and prayer of the people is that their city may become the terminus of some great system,” and so deliver them from “the old days of cotton.”³⁷

Ralph fell back on a typical Yankee ambivalence: he trumpeted the ending of sectional conflict and even of slavery while imbibing the picturesque charms wrought in that history. In doing so, however, he displaced the political project of national reconciliation onto the aesthetic effort of seeing modern life. Although hardly a distinguished aesthetic thinker or follower of art, Ralph and his project can be compared to that of contemporary European painters who were attempting to find an aesthetic form to capture the ephemeral modern moment. In paintings such as *On the Outskirts of Paris* (1887), for instance, Vincent van Gogh exemplified the work of painting historical change: Haussmann’s Paris merges into the Montmartre suburb at a muddy crossroads, a melancholic dissolving of past and future reinforced by the pairing of an indiscernible figure with a new lamppost. Thus van Gogh can be said to have recorded not only the subjective view of the eye but the liquefying effects of capital that was shocking both human senses and the built environment, an “impression” that captures what critic T. J. Clark describes

³⁵ Julian Ralph, *Dixie; or, Southern Scenes and Sketches* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1895), 104.

³⁶ Ralph, *Dixie*, 248,

³⁷ Ralph, *Dixie*, 266-67.

as “the deliquescent character of everything.”³⁸ Such melting of differences between past and future on the modern scene excited and disturbed Ralph, who sought to melt the historic “water color city” into “some great system” while affirming the pastness of sectional conflict and the “old days of cotton.”

What stood at the limit between the picturesque and the progressive was the figure of the “negro.” In Charleston, Ralph nearly overlooked its African American citizens as a “queer people” that blended with the picturesque scenery. Yet the more he attempted to develop a snapshot of the South in the frame of a progressive nation, the more African Americans became conspicuous in his field of vision. Because “negroes...[are] under little stimulus towards social improvement, or any ambition except that of being able to live from day to day,” they “deprive the State of that reservoir of latent strength and potential wealth which an industrious and ambitious multitude of not-at-all-to-be-despised foreign immigrants would bring to it.”³⁹ In Ralph’s alchemy of race and nation, the South wouldn’t resolve into the picture of the nation until its black population had been washed away by the tide of—not quite white, but “not-at-all-to-be-despised”—European immigrants. In a city on the brink of modernity, the “negro” was a relic from the “old days of cotton.” Like the blurred figure at Van Gogh’s crossroads, the racialized figure of the “negro” both marked a border between past and future and provoked an anxiety about which path would be taken. For Ralph, the “negro” was unsettling for not remaining in the picturesque past.

Indeed nothing “shocked” Ralph’s daydreaming more than the “negro.” In a penultimate chapter dedicated to the “Plantation Negro,” Ralph attempted to sync the advance of capitalism to the retreat of black freedom. Although he evaded discussing “the merits of the political

³⁸ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 25-28, quotation on 28.

³⁹ Ralph, *Dixie*, 271.

situation,” he contemplated “the negro’s future in the South” in a doubled frame of the old plantation and the coming of the “great system” of modernity. In the folds of the picturesque and the progressive he spied social disorder:

They seem happy there, in the main, and many who have emigrated to the West during recent ‘crazes’ have toiled back again, singing of their love for ‘Dixie’s land.’ Many Northern men established in business in the South declare that white men can never fill the place the colored man occupies as a general laborer there. The most serious question is that of the free ballot, but here are two sides to that. If we lived with our wives and children in a lonely planter’s house in a region where a far ruder people outnumbered us ten to one, it is possible that we would get a glimpse of a side not visible from any Northern standpoint. But even then we might not see why the education of the colored man, the presence and example of newly imported European labor, the steady influx of new peoples and Northern capital should not some day alter the conditions there, and remove the complaints.

Between the displaced nostalgia for “Dixie” enjoyed through the eyes of the “negro,” and the nostrums of progress through education—but mainly through the “influx” of white immigrants and capital—Ralph touched on a more sinister set of fears. While he alluded to African Americans’ claim to the vote and the value of their labor to Northern business, he “glimpsed” the white Southern “standpoint” in which they had been “craze[d]” by freedom and were a menace to “our wives and children.” But against his paternalist wish that African Americans longed to return to a state of slavery, or that they might be incorporated into the mainstream of development through educational reform, Ralph acceded to the Southern adumbration of black freedom in their movement and their vote. The result was a complex palimpsest of stasis and change. As he imagined opening the South as an outlet for Northern capital and excess foreign labor, he produced a contradictory image of the “negro,” split between a contented servant and restless freed person. It was a contradiction whose resolution Ralph deferred to the future. His own nostalgia for slavery, along with his anxiety about race, were resolved in his dream theater

of development that would one day “alter the conditions” and “remove the complaints.” “Time is needed,” Ralph concluded, “and with it patience.”⁴⁰

Ralph would have to await D. W. Griffith’s camera for a device that could capture the unfolding of this “time,” a moving picture of national renewal that would redeem the sin of slavery in a fantasy of racial containment and castration. Indeed it was difficult to resolve these contrary movements into a picture, as Ralph’s cautious hired illustrators attest. Despite the reception of the book as a “photographic” document, half-tone photographic reproduction was yet a difficult and expensive process, even for leading magazines such as *Harper’s Monthly* where Ralph’s work was first published. While *Dixie* contained a very few photograph reproductions, the illustrations were composed by commercial artists working from photographs.⁴¹ (Whether these photographs were taken by Ralph, a hired photographer, or a stock photography company was documented by neither *Harper’s* nor Ralph.⁴²) More than a reflection of the material conditions of visual reproduction, the images demonstrate a pattern of aesthetic forms in which *Harper’s* illustrators attempted to coordinate the presence of African Americans in the modern scene with Ralph, and the reader’s, presence as spectators. The illustrator of “Working as All Negroes Do” juxtaposed a neatly-dressed black man languidly looking on at “roustabouts” heaving loads on their backs (fig. 3.2): the viewer was invited to satirize the “aimless” black worker in the foreground as an allegorical devolution from a history of productive work undertaken in the background. In “Buzzards at the Market,” by contrast, the photographer followed Ralph’s eye in training the reader on the picturesque wildlife at

⁴⁰ Ralph, *Dixie*, 387.

⁴¹ Laura Wexler, “Techniques for Imagining the Nation: Engendering Family Photography,” in Ardis Cameron, ed., *Looking for America: the Visual Production of Nation and People* (Walden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 99.

⁴² Except for signatures on some of the prints, the illustrators went uncredited in *Dixie*. The table of contents in which one of Ralph’s essays appeared lists “W. A. Rogers, Alfred Brennan, Otto H. Bacher, and from Photographs,” along with engravings by A. M. Lindsay. *Harper’s Monthly* 90.540 (May 1895), n. p.

Charleston's old marketplace—in fact a former slave market—while relegating the African Americans to the background (fig. 3.3). In “Easy-Going Negroes” in Washington, D.C., illustrator Thomas Dart Walker rendered what Ralph described as a “darky mob...most picturesque” with a painterly hand that betrayed his French training; the sunbeams dappled through overhanging trees seem to bring the picturesque scene into the viewer's present (fig. 3.4). Even as Ralph sought to push the scene of African American urbanites back into a fantasy time of “huge bandanna-crowned ‘mammies,’ [and] white-bearded, rheumatic old ‘uncles,’” Walker instead dissolved the boundary between the “easy-going” white spectator reading *Dixie* in Manhattan and the spectacle of a black urban society in the nation's capital.⁴³

Walker's impressionist painting of modern black life reflects perhaps less an implicit critique towards Ralph's plantation fantasy than a lack of aesthetic forms in which that fantasy could be realized in the modern eye. The patience that would defer the “political situation” was realized most fully by *Harper's* illustrator Lucius W. Hitchcock in his engraving, “Planting Rice on a Carolina Plantation” (fig. 3.5). Although he drew in the style of an old fashioned woodcut, Hitchcock was also an amateur photographer and composed his illustrations with a photographic eye. As Hitchcock would declare to the Photographers' Association of America in 1901, photography and painting “go hand in hand.” As painters could improve their technique by taking naturalistic “hint[s] from the camera,” so photographers could learn from painterly composition to progress their art “beyond the mere representation of nature.” Indeed he saw the progress dialectically, the photograph improving the painting while the painterly hand improves the photograph. While the camera captured the instant of modern life, more specifically, the painter could compose it into a picturesque scene:

⁴³ Ralph, *Dixie*, 342.

Take a railroad and telegraph wires. Here we have simple geometrical depth, and to a certain extent the [artistic] effect is pleasing, but the lines are long and unbroken, with no variation, and consequently monotonous. It isn't what one would call picturesque, as it would be if the lines were broken and the light and dark masses so varied as to draw the eye *into* the picture along a pleasing swaying line, bringing the strongest contrast into the middle distance.⁴⁴

As Hitchcock recoiled from the modernity of the telegraph wire, and the modernism of “simple geometric depth” that would represent it, so he submerged the photographic view of black rice planters into a picturesque haze, its rough black and white lines recalling a woodcut engraving while also fragmenting its “light and dark masses” to draw the viewer’s eye into a historical “middle distance.” Thus he turned a potentially contemporary recognition of African American labor into a timeless picture of plantation life—at the cost of effacing the camera that gave the view a purchase on the moment of now.⁴⁵

As Ralph sought to see a modernizing South in water color tones, he could only achieve such a picture by either wishing African Americans back to slavery or fantasizing about their disappearance. His illustrators attempted to realize these dreams by absenting the camera from the scene. Instead of harmonizing the picturesque scene with the shocks of progress, the camera unraveled the system of differences on which that harmony depended. A specter of slavery shimmered in the contemporary plantation; the African American not a timeless “negro” but a contemporary fellow. The visual project of national reconciliation demanded not only a new technology but a new artistic technique to incorporate a remainder of the picturesque into the rush of progress.

⁴⁴ Lucius W. Hitchcock, Address before the Photographers’ Association of America, Detroit, 1901, reprinted as “The Element of Composition,” *The American Amateur Photographer* 13 (1901): 417-422, quotations on 417, 421.

⁴⁵ Indeed, for Hitchcock, the difference between painting and photography of such scenes collapsed into the common element of a modern snapshot: “Keep on the alert for beautiful combinations and arrangements all the time,” Hitchcock advised. “You are just as apt to see them in the street cars as anywhere else, and if you store up a reserve of souvenirs of this sort you will do more original and better pictures.” Hitchcock, “The Element of Composition,” 422.

III. Modernism *Down South*

No one went further in the effort to restore the picturesque plantation to modern vision than amateur photographer Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr. (1862-1932). In 1883, Eickemeyer wrote to his father in Yonkers, New York, about what he saw through the eyes of the black laborers on Alfred Dreyspring's plantation in Montgomery County, Alabama: "slavery days—a time when they never had a care." So, too, did Eickemeyer long for a time without care. His father, Rudolf Eickemeyer, Sr., was a famous electrical engineer and co-owner of a manufacturing firm that would be absorbed into General Electric in 1893. Like so many other bourgeois youths in the age of incorporation, Eickemeyer, Jr., was ambivalent about the swiftness of progress wrought by his father's generation, and traveled with his camera to capture disappearing ways of life, from the Colorado frontier to his own backyard in rural New York. "Much as we appreciate the values of labor saving machinery," Eickemeyer wrote of his photographs of the "rustic life" in *The Old Farm*, "it is with a feeling of regret that we realize that its intrusion is making scenes of this kind scarcer every year." The South and its picturesque atmosphere was a particularly enticing refuge. By 1900, Eickemeyer had made four trips to Alabama to photograph the Dreyspring plantation and its "excellent subjects": "The river and its banks with high moss-covered trees and negro cabins, the cypress swamps, the cane breaks, the corn and cotton fields, while the negroes themselves were all excellent models." Indeed the only thing modern about the setting, it seemed to Eickemeyer, was Eickemeyer himself. "No 'button-pusher' had yet found the place and to the negroes I, with my camera and tripod, was a constant source of surprise."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr., to Rudolf Eickemeyer, Sr. (c. 1883), in Rudolf Eickemeyer Papers, Hudson River Museum; Rudolf Eickemeyer, "Seasons," in Eickemeyer Papers (p. 11), Division of Photographic History, NMAH-SI; Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr., in "Dere's No Mo' Work for Old Uncle Ned," *American Annual of Photography & Photographic Times Almanac* (1892), 249-50—all cited in Mary Panzer, *In My Studio: Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr., and the Art of the Camera, 1885-1930* (Yonkers: The Hudson River Museum, 1986), 56, 58; for my reading of Eickemeyer's Southern photographs in relation to his career I have relied on Panzer, "The Fusion of Reality and Utility," in *In My Studio*, 46-62.

Eickemeyer was drawn to Dreyspring less to incorporate the South in a dream of industrial development than to find refuge from that very “monster” of modernity—though he, too, thrilled to imagine himself bearing modernity into the picturesque landscape by “surprise.” But what makes Eickemeyer so surprising—to us, if not to the Dreyspring workers—is the milieu in which his photographs circulated. Eickemeyer sold his photographs of the South not only to restore a past to a progressive nation but to promote a modern form of art. Eickemeyer was no mere “button-pusher”; he was an artist. Although Eickemeyer travelled in the same amateur photography circles as Ralph’s illustrators, for instance, for a time he was aligned with Alfred Stieglitz in attempting to distinguish photography as an art form from mass-produced commercial photography and from salon painting. They did so by arguing that photography was the aesthetic medium best suited to capture the modern nation in the flux of change.

Eickemeyer’s views of cotton fields and black field hands circulated in the same galleries and salons as Stieglitz’s equally “picturesque” photographs of the Manhattan street. Indeed publisher R. H. Russell issued their respective portfolios as companion pieces—Eickemeyer’s *Down South* (1900) a kind of sequel to Stieglitz’s *Picturesque Bits of New York* (1897). But whereas Stieglitz’s “straight” photographs of the cityscape have become icons of American modernism, Eickemeyer’s photographs of the Dreyspring plantation have been all but excluded from the modernist canon. While this elision certainly follows from Stieglitz’s success in defining the look of artistic photography for an elite metropolitan viewership, it also illuminates a critical moment when the politics of the memory of slavery intersected with the aesthetic politics of modernism.

Eickemeyer forged an idiosyncratic career as a photographer. He emerged alongside Stieglitz as a leading light of artistic photography in the 1890s. Both were the first Americans to be inducted to the Linked Ring, the elite British society for artistic photography. When Stieglitz

helped to amalgamate the Society of Amateur Photographers and the New York Camera Club into the Camera Club of New York, he featured Eickemeyer's work in one of the Club's first solo exhibitions in 1899. Critical champion of artistic photography—and mutual friend—Sadakichi Hartmann positioned the two photographers on the artistic vanguard; in a phrase that conjoined social and aesthetic meaning, he championed them both for departing from the “imitation of foreign models.” But Eickemeyer would not be included among the Photo-Secessionists, Stieglitz's chosen group of modernist photographers, and Eickemeyer's work would never appear in the secession's journal, *Camera Work*. Instead he chose the path of commerce, and quickly established himself foremost in that field. He made portraits of society women and star actresses on commission to Campbell Art Co. who supplied publications such *Town & Country* and *Vanity Fair*. He would also endorse the products of Eastman Kodak Co.: he was the “Camera-Master” over the “Witch of Kodakery.” This commercial turn was anathema to Stieglitz, of course, though he too would join Eickemeyer in contributing advice to “button-pushers” in Eastman Kodak Co.'s *The Modern Way in Picture Making* (1905).

The split between Eickemeyer and Stieglitz obscured a debate between the two—conducted as much through photographs as through words—over the value of history in composing a photograph of the modern. Far from an apolitical aesthetic, as art historian Lauren Kroiz shows, pictorialist photographers thought about their medium in a language of race, and contemplated their subject matter within debates about the ethnic composition of the modern nation.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Lauren Kroiz, *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14. Eickemeyer usually only makes a brief cameo in accounts of the Photo-Secession and in Stieglitz's biographies, not only in Kroiz but also in Katherine Hoffman, *Stieglitz: A Beginning Light* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 166.

To understand how viewers saw slavery in *Down South* requires first examining the context in which they saw photography as art—a context that Stieglitz did much to shape. After he had successfully shown his work in European exhibitions, Stieglitz released *Picturesque Bits of New York and Other Studies* (1897) as his first published portfolio. It launched his career as the preeminent proponent of artistic photography in the United States and among the eventual leaders of transatlantic visual modernism. Juxtaposing photogravure prints of Venetian canals and Parisian boulevards alongside New York’s Central Park and Broadway, Stieglitz made an implicit visual argument that New York was as worthy an artistic subject as Old Europe, and photography as legitimate an artistic medium as painting. In photographs such as “Winter—Fifth Avenue” (1893), perhaps the most iconic picture from Stieglitz’s early career, Stieglitz conveyed this dual aim by elevating the mundane cityscape into the register of the picturesque. For the pictorial photographers represented by Stieglitz, the picturesque named the paramount aesthetic ideal—not only as a sight of the rough and historic, or as a voyeuristic view on lower classes and primitive races, but as a feeling crafted by the artist’s imagination. As “Winter” “stimulate[d] the poetic imagination” for capturing “the effect of a cold winter’s day with the blinding snow and misty atmosphere,” Walter E. Woodbury wrote in his introduction, so did Stieglitz imprint himself on the scene: “we see the same master hand in the composition, the light and shade, the general feeling and motive, a completeness and harmony throughout all.”⁴⁸ This celebration of the “master” photographer of the modern scene resonated beyond Stieglitz’s society of amateur photographers. As historian Alan Trachtenberg explains, Stieglitz gave the “picturesque” a social

⁴⁸ Walter E. Woodbury, “Concerning the Contents,” in Alfred Stieglitz, *Picturesque Bits of New York and Other Studies* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1897), n.p.

meaning for the metropolitan readers of mass magazines for which he supplied and wrote about photography.⁴⁹

To support his aesthetic of the modern picturesque, Stieglitz mounted a new social relationship between the photographer and photography. In “Pictorial Photography,” written for *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1899, Stieglitz described artistic photography as both an expression and containment of national progress. If “the savage knows no other way to perpetuate the history of his race” than through pictures, now “the most highly civilized” have turned to photography as “a means of making pictures with but little labor and requiring less knowledge.” In the age of Kodak, in other words, the very mechanism that granted the “general public” unprecedented means to document the fruits of civilization also coarsened their aesthetic knowledge and discipline; the result was “thoughtlessness” in the picture-taker and the “brand of mechanism” in the pictures. What photography demanded, Stieglitz argued, were a new self and a new way of seeing that could lend visual coherence to the modern moment. Photographers were “workers,” he stressed, and they used the apparatus of photography—“[l]ens, camera, plate, developing baths, printing process, and the like”—“simply as tools for the elaboration of their ideas, and not as tyrants to enslave and dwarf them.” By using the camera not simply to record the times, but to master those times into visual form, photographic workers exercised an artistic freedom to turn modernity into poetry. “Metropolitan scenes, homely in themselves,” Stieglitz argued, nevertheless could be photographed “in such a way as to impart to them a permanent value because of the poetic conception of the subject displayed in their rendering.”⁵⁰ In this light,

⁴⁹ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 176-90. While Kroiz aptly notes and corrects how Trachtenberg overlooks race (and Hartmann) in shaping the composition and meaning of Stieglitz’s modernist photographic practice, she overstates the extent to which Trachtenberg slights Stieglitz’s social position in opposition to Lewis Hine, the former an apolitical aesthete and the latter a politically-committed documentarian. Rather, in Trachtenberg’s reading, Stieglitz’s photographs are imbued with (and in magazines such as *Scribner’s* helped to shape) the social vision of his class—the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

⁵⁰ Stieglitz, “Pictorial Photography,” 117, 118, 123.

“Winter—Fifth Avenue” conveyed a constellation of meaning, the cameraman in the snow as much a worker as the idealized cab driver, the work of looking a means to “perpetuate” the history of progress into a picture of a civilization. By extracting a picturesque “bit” out of the flux of metropolitan life and granting it permanent artistic value, Stieglitz declared his alliance with progress won by his mastery over the camera and the freedom of the eye it enabled.

The modern photographer constructed the modern picturesque by tautology: a “bit” was picturesque because the photographer photographed it. Thus “Winter—Fifth Avenue” can be seen as both a scene of contemporary New York made nostalgic and a modern work of art wrought by a masterful eye. Indeed, the image of Stieglitz standing in the snowstorm with his hand camera, waiting to release the shutter at the perfect moment, has become as much the primal scene of American modernism as the photograph itself. “Winter” was, as critic Sadakichi Hartmann put it, “self-sufficient art.”⁵¹ Yet what sustained this self-sufficiency was a free relation to history. Both the class and ethnic identity of the cab driver, to say nothing of the histories of immigration, technology, and urbanization that shaped those identities, were abstracted by Stieglitz’s camera into an idealized symbol of labor, blurred into the rush of the city. It was a view that excluded the social conflict documented by Stieglitz’s contemporary Lewis Hine, whose stark photographs of child laborers for the social reform journal *The Survey* Stieglitz “took no notice of.”⁵² Yet it was a view that proved welcoming to portraits of ethnic “types,” whether in Stieglitz’s cubist photograph of European workers departing America (“The Steerage” [1907]) or Gertrude Käsebier’s romanticized studio portraits of Native Americans. What guided Stieglitz’s selections were shaped by his German-Jewish background and aspirations to compose,

⁵¹ Quoted in Kroiz, *Creative Composites*, 18.

⁵² Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 165.

in art as in himself, a “pure” American identity.⁵³ Thus his conception of the picturesque mirrored his conception of the American: a person could make himself American if he was already American, a tautology that would soon be articulated in legal conceptions of citizenship that defined national identity by racial essence. Whereas Hine meant his photographs to refer to the child laborer, then, Stieglitz could mean his photographs of European emigrants and Käsebier’s of Native Americans to refer to American photography on the level of the composition, even the very materiality, of the photographs themselves. While a child laborer represented an American social conflict, ethnic “steerage” represented an American problem that could be sent away, and an Indian an American problem that was vanishing.⁵⁴

Both Stieglitz’s photographs and conception of modernist photography established the context in which viewers saw Eickemeyer’s *Down South*. Of course, on the surface, photographs such as “Picking Time” (fig. 3.6) could not have been more different in subject matter and “look” than “Winter—Fifth Avenue.” While Stieglitz collected picturesque bits from Continental streets and Manhattan blizzards, Eickemeyer found his among the sharecroppers of an Alabama cotton plantation; and while Stieglitz chose ten landscapes and two figure studies that evoked a shared wistful mood, Eickemeyer stocked his portfolio with 48 landscapes and portraits in moods that ranged from the nostalgic to the satiric. Both the publisher and the readership judged the photograph through Stieglitz’s lens. Although R. H. Russell published *Down South* three years after *Picturesque Bits of New York*, it was the upscale publisher’s second photographic portfolio. It received wide reception among followers of artistic photography and the middle-class readers of the Chicago literary journal *The Dial* and of *The New York Times*. In its notice the *Times* read

⁵³ Koitz, *Creative Composites*, chap. 1.

⁵⁴ Although he does not discuss Stieglitz or photography, the surest guide to these politics and the tautological mode of identification they generate remains Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), esp. 29-40. For the modern value of the trope of the vanishing Indian, see Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Eickemeyer's photographs as modern in Stieglitz's sense: as *Down South* "represents forty-eight pictures of Southern negro life," so did its "fine representations" exemplify "the most advanced stage of photography."⁵⁵ So, too, did *The Dial* endorse the book for its "photographic pictures illustrative of negro life and character" and for their photographer's "skill in the use of the camera." Eickemeyer's plantation was picturesque for the same reason Stieglitz's New York was: because the skilled photographer photographed it. *The Dial* further clarified why photographs of "negroes" in *Down South* could be photographed as "bits" of the modern picturesque. They were not only free of the "burlesque element which caricaturists of negro life have accentuated *ad nauseam*," but they were also a "truthful reflection of a phase of American life now fading fast into history."⁵⁶

The sense of the modern evoked by *Down South* can be explained by comparing Eickemeyer's "The Day's Work Done" (fig. 3.7) to Stieglitz's iconic and more familiarly modernist "Flat Iron" (1903). "Flat Iron" continues to exemplify the aspirations of modernist photography for the way Stieglitz turned a skyscraper—what Stieglitz, anticipating Henry James, called a "monster"—into a picturesque "bit." By aiming his camera so the Madison Square Park tree would tower over the height of the skyscraper, Stieglitz flattened the natural and the machine-made in the same symbolic plane, and so placed the symbol of America's futurity in ambiguous tension with nature. If Stieglitz could make a skyscraper into a subject of art only by mystifying "the uses of the building and the social relations they manifest," so too could Eickemeyer turn the Dreyspring plantation into a work of modern art by transforming history into a product of the camera.⁵⁷ But whereas Stieglitz sought to record America's future,

⁵⁵ "Some Humorous and Artistic Books," *New York Times* (Aug. 4, 1900), p. BR13.

⁵⁶ "Holiday Publications," *The Dial* (Dec. 1, 1900), 430.

⁵⁷ Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 215; Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 179. My gloss on Stieglitz's "Flat Iron" derives from Trachtenberg's and Douglas's lucid contextual reading.

Eickemeyer recorded the disappearance of a past. Rather than merge the elements of the picture onto a flat plane, Eickemeyer created depth by training his camera up a mild dirt path to dramatize the figure's climb away. The "work" of the laborer was historically and allegorically "done," the "negro"—an identity communicated in the photograph less by the color of his skin than his work clothes—at once returning home for the day and walking away from the modern photographer, and out of history. Eickemeyer's poetic conception alluded to the martyrdom of Uncle Tom and the nostalgia of minstrelsy's "uncles" while also establishing the camera in the secular now. Thus "Flat Iron" and "Day's Work Done" comprise a dyad of modernist vision. The Flat Iron, as Sadakichi Hartmann described the building and the photograph, looked "for future ages [to] proclaim / Your beauty, boldly, / Without shame"; the rural "negro" and the "life" he symbolizes, meanwhile, were apprehended as they disappeared.⁵⁸

But what, to Eickemeyer's metropolitan viewers, was disappearing? And what drew them to apprehend it? The allusive and hazy quality of the photographs invited multiple interpretations that nevertheless reveal common desires and anxieties about how to see the past called to mind by "negro life" from a self-consciously modern standpoint. *Down South* was most immediately introduced to viewers as a memory of slavery recovered by the powers of a modern artist—and by no less of an authority than Joel Chandler Harris. Harris was an apt choice to introduce the volume. That Harris could speak of the memory of slavery in the language of international aestheticism was part and parcel of his own folklore project. What is more, Eickemeyer's photographs easily answered to Harris's own desire to see slavery captured in a modern medium of American art. Indeed Harris was so taken with Eickemeyer's work he not only had it accompany his dialect story "Flingin' Jim and His Fool Killer," published in *Cosmopolitan* that

⁵⁸ Sadakichi Hartmann, "To the 'Flat Iron,'" in *Drifting Flowers of the Sea, and Other Poems* (self-published, 1904), 12; reprinted online: <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/30216/hart-toth.pdf> (accessed Feb. 25, 2015).

February, he also incorporated the prints into his own bustling photographic archive of Southern plantation scenes and “Uncle Remus” models: Eickemeyer provided photographic supplements for the memory of slavery now long gone.⁵⁹ But Harris’s celebration of Eickemeyer’s photographs went further by reproducing that memory as material for a self-consciously modern audience: it helped to link the “Old South” to the unfolding future of the nation.

To Harris, Eickemeyer was “an artist of the camera [who] has been looking about in the South for the picturesque and has succeeded in finding it in all sorts of out-of-the-way places.” No mere “reporter of facts,” in Eickemeyer’s hands the camera was a “very susceptible instrument”; demonstrating an acute sense of “selection” of models, scene, and “the apt moment,” the photographs “give wide wings to the imagination” because “the man behind the instrument was both a poet and an artist.”⁶⁰ Harris was speaking about photography in a voice not unlike Stieglitz, and may very well have been reading Stieglitz in *Scribner’s*, where Uncle Remus stories occasionally appeared. What made Eickemeyer’s photographs stand for slavery, according to Harris, was the way Eickemeyer avoided presenting the South as a relic from the past, as if the region was valuable only for its “historic association,” like a ruined European castle. Instead Harris read into Eickemeyer’s photographs a more dynamic interaction between past and present. “[I]n the old slave States, on the cotton, tobacco and rice plantations, . . . the most startling contrasts and contradictions whirled and swarmed, dancing, as it were, a perpetual morris-dance, while the rest of the world looked on with wonder or interest, with admiration or indignation.” Though slavery had sequestered the South from global progress, this past now warranted the nation’s appearance before an audience of world civilization. With “a rampant and raging love of liberty existing side by side with human slavery,” and “culture, refinement,

⁵⁹ Currently held in series 3, box 16, folder 24 of Joel Chandler Harris Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

⁶⁰ Joel Chandler Harris, introduction to *Down South* (New York: R. H. Russell, 1900), no pg. [2].

learning... all touching with an ignorance dense and barbarian,” the Old South offered material for “romancers” and sources for “harmony and vitality” for novelists; it offered no less a universal than “the essence of human life.” Writing in oblique reference to Henry James, Harris defended the Southern past against the “critic [who] was saying the other day that we lack in this republic an atmosphere necessary to the production of really great fiction”; the lack instead was in “the eyes capable of perceiving [the nation] in the fulness of its beauty [sic].” Eickemeyer produced such eyes.⁶¹

For Harris, Eickemeyer’s photographs brought the “old slave States” and its “morris dance” of contradictions—indeed the very paradox of slavery and freedom—to life in the modern eye; what had only been a sense of the past was transformed by Eickemeyer’s camera into a recognizable art object available for the nation. In effect, his reading of *Down South* rephrased the politics of national reconciliation in a modernist key. Yet to achieve this view Harris overlooked the very figure that transfixed competing readings of *Down South* in: the African American figures that Eickemeyer centrally displayed.

For art critic Margaret M. Hurlll, writing in the Chicago-based Arts & Crafts journal *Brush and Pencil*, Eickemeyer’s photography gave unique insight into the “art side of negro life.” Hurlll distinguished this “art side” from the portrayals in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and in Harris’s Uncle Remus as well as in “conventional pictures of negro subjects, in which a slice of watermelon or a stolen chicken is an important feature.” Yet Hurlll used Eickemeyer’s photographs as a visual evidence to claim a wider emancipation of African Americans as makers of art: “the artistic nature of the negroes as a race has been under the harsh spell of bondage, and as yet scarcely realizes that its shackles have been stricken off.” Here Hurlll merged the abolitionist spirit with the Arts & Crafts ideal. To redeem the voice of the slave was to reclaim an

⁶¹ Harris, introduction to *Down South*, no pg. [1-2].

authentic folkways in a romantic conception of national renewal. Eickemeyer's photographs seemed to put "the negro" at the origin of their own visual representation, "develop[ing] in his cabin home a pictorial art as unique and as striking as his music and his legends." Yet the tension between the "art side of negro life" and Eickemeyer's medium of mechanical reproduction introduced ambiguities into Hurl's account that she could not resolve. How could African Americans be artistically emancipated if the authentic value of their art was grounded in the time and place of the old plantation? How could that authentic value be reproduced in a medium whose claim to art was in recording the modern moment? While Eickemeyer's "snap-shots of negro scenes and characters....c[atch] his subjects in apt moments," for Hurl they paradoxically returned those scenes and characters into bondage: they were "photographs of fine picture value that recall the old plantation days." As Hurl glimpsed of the "art life" of African Americans, so she displaced its scene back in time and its reproduction to a painter with "greater freedom of selection and elimination."⁶²

For Harris, the memory of slavery and the modernist photographer could emerge together by submerging the figure of the "negro" into a picturesque whirl of contrast and contradictions; for Hurl, African Americans could be emancipated as makers of art only by disassociating them from the photographer and the modern time he stood for. For Sadakichi Hartmann, critical champion of modernist photography, the modernist photographer could only emerge by submerging both the memory of slavery and the "negro." Hartmann was Eickemeyer's friend and would promote his more abstract—and thoroughly nostalgic—photographic landscapes of the rural New England winter. But if in *Down South* Eickemeyer had set out to "do[] for the Southern negro something similar to what Millet did for the French peasant," Hartmann chided, then he had resolutely failed. From the outset, it seemed, Eickemeyer's project was disqualified

⁶² Margaret M. Hurl, "In Negro Cabins," *Brush and Pencil* 7.4 (Jan. 1901), 239, 248, 244, 247.

from the realm of modernist art that Hartmann was guarding. Unlike Stieglitz's picturesque rendering of the Manhattan street scene, Eickemeyer's picturesque portrayal of "Southern negroes" was not "self-sufficient." By imitating the "accepted traditions" of the Barbizon School, Eickemeyer betrayed a "cold" automation behind his "mechanical excellence"; they fell short of pictorialist standards because they lacked a "certain unexpectedness" and the "pulse-beat of life." (Hartmann's art historical eye was sharper than Harris's or Hurl's: Eickemeyer's "Picking Time" was a near reenactment of *The Gleaners* [1857], Millet's famous painting of the rural picturesque.) Yet what betrayed Eickemeyer's "cold" camera was his depiction of the "negro"—not as a relic from "slavery days" but as contemporaries. Because Eickemeyer's photographs did not rise above the "bare transcription of facts," they showed the "Southern negro" from the "ethnological point of view, and may be valuable as a work of reference to all those who take an interest in our teeming cosmopolitan populations."⁶³

Hartmann was a German Japanese immigrant who counted himself among America's "cosmopolitan population," and he saw modernist photography as a medium through which to envision a culturally pluralist America: a future art and a future nation unburdened by tradition and sovereign over machines. Yet here Hartmann presaged the racial logic that gave African Americans ambivalent value in the modernist imagination. The "plantation" referred less to the history of slavery than to the "negro" as a sign of difference, at once an ethnographic other and cosmopolitan subject. In modernist works as different as Arthur Dove's assemblage of bamboo and denim (*Nigger Goes A-Fishin'* [1925]) or Josephine Baker's self-aware burlesque performances, the plantation appeared as an image of an abstract and ahistorical racial surface, rather than a deep reference to the history of slavery that race was meant to order. Just so, even

⁶³ Sadakichi Hartmann, "Rudolph [sic] Eickemeyer's Negro Studies," *The Amateur Photographer* 32 (Dec. 28, 1900), 513-14.

as Hartmann gestured to the membership of the “Southern negro” within the modern cosmopolis, all that he could salvage from Eickemeyer’s Southern matter was the abstract racial form.

During the brief reception of *Down South*, critics judged Eickemeyer against a future artist who would one day capture the nation’s past as a picturesque “bit” for modern eyes. And they welcomed this artist for fixing slavery in a past that assured the nation’s progress. What obscured this future, however, was the sight of the “negro,” whose mark on the photograph at once symbolized a picturesque past and inscribed the African American citizen in the contemporary the American scene. For each of his critics, at stake in evaluating Eickemeyer’s modernism was the quality of a camerawork that could resolve the place of African Americans in the time of the nation. Eickemeyer himself seemed to sense a national import for his photographs that indulged his desire to see “slavery days” vicariously through the eyes of his “models.” In portraits such as “Gabe” (fig. 3.8), Eickemeyer can be seen exercising what Laura Wexler has called a “tender violence” that turned the brutal subordination of racial “others” into domestic portraits of an emerging American imperial order.⁶⁴ Yet, in their reception, viewers fell short of incorporating Eickemeyer’s “negro” subjects into the contemporary scene. Harris either overlooked these portraits or found their meaning indistinguishable from that of a cotton field; Hurll treated them ahistorically as stand-ins for a slave’s “art life”; Hartmann found them odious as “genre” conventions. Did they represent the beautiful tragedy of the South, the redemptive promise of the black slave, or the failed potential of the camera?

Ultimately the reception of *Down South* shifts the referent of Eickemeyer’s photographs from the Dreyspring workers and the picturesque memory of slavery they purported to capture to their metropolitan viewers and their anxieties about the nature of progress—the nation’s and their own. Indeed Eickemeyer’s point of reference for the portraits seemed less to be domestic

⁶⁴ See Wexler, *Tender Violence*, chap. 5.

portraiture than the glossy celebrity publicity stills, a genre that he was helping to innovate and that would make his name. Just a year after publishing *Down South* Eickemeyer took a studio portrait of the famous actress Evelyn Nesbit, the prototypical New Woman who Charles Dana Gibson turned into the iconic “Gibson Girl.” Such images depended on celebrating and containing the autonomy of the New Woman—creative and sexual—in idioms of glamour. Just as Eickemeyer posed Nesbit against the incongruous backdrop of a polar bear skin rug, a modern woman refracting an elemental natural force, so in “Curiosity” (fig. 3.9) he staged a seemingly surreptitious moment when a young girl catches the modern photographer at work, less “surprised” than inquisitive. While many of Eickemeyer’s portraits showed men and women supposedly lost in nostalgic reverie for slavery (“Thoughts of Other Days”), he also staged images of generational change, such as a young woman teaching an older woman to read (“The New South”).

None of Eickemeyer’s “models” took greater steps into the viewer’s contemporary scene than “Vanity” (fig. 3.10), in which a girl dressed in hand-me-down fashion and a tattered parasol poses not for her onlookers watching along the clapboard fence and cabin, but for Eickemeyer’s camera. Eickemeyer surely intended to satirize the pretensions of the young girl to mimic the airs of contemporary white urbanites—but he also furnished a distorted mirror of Eickemeyer’s own audience. His was a satire that depended on an anxiety about the historical substance and racial integrity of the modern American self. What did “Vanity” mean to the reader of *Vanity Fair*?

IV. American Young Things

For a rising generation of middle-class Americans, the problem of seeing slavery was less a matter of making modern art than a matter of making modern selves. Take Mildred Cram

(1889-1985). Although she was a generation younger than Julian Ralph and Rudolf Eickemeyer, Cram was also a New Yorker who traveled South both to find relief from the modern and to incorporate the region and its history into her modern vision. She sought to perfect a modern self. Perhaps because she could not rely upon the public to recognize her as a solidly “good fellow,” and perhaps because she struck for a career as a writer rather than a “Camera-Master,” Cram was attuned to how the forces of material progress and the advances in technology provided both possibilities and perils for attaching the self to the currents of change. As a modern, as a woman, and as an American she was stirred by new horizons—but also felt a lack. When she looked at her generation she saw “a wild mixture of Paris, futurism, the primitives, and a little rouge,” as she wrote to the young women readers of *Vogue* in 1917. “She is young, she is lovely, and she is superficial; she is like American frame-houses and temporary stone walls and mushroom cities.” Of course, Cram herself was an “American Young Thing”—a fashionable 28 year-old who thrilled at Broadway’s lights and was at home among Greenwich Village’s cafes and galleries; she was on her way to becoming an O’Henry award-winning fiction author and successful Hollywood screenwriter. Yet she sought to balance her modern freedoms with the boundaries of tradition lest she dissolve; she advised the American Young Thing to seek “the patience of maturity, the patience born of generations of discipline, to carry our inspiration through to perfect realization.”⁶⁵

Her journey followed many of the same contours as those of James, Ralph, and Eickemeyer. Indeed the material conditions of her quest were the same: for her journey to the Southern seaports she brought along her brother Allan, a painter, and her own hand-held snapshot camera. And she pressured that technology with the same irreconcilable demands. She was drawn to the memory of slavery as a font of both racial and aesthetic order; yet she recoiled

⁶⁵ Mildred R. Cram, “The Extreme Adolescence of America,” *Vogue* 49.3 (Feb. 1, 1917), 66, 88

from the claims this history made on the nation and on her. Particularly disturbing for the Crams were contemporary African Americans who figured both as transport to a mythical old plantation and as disruptive reminders about their freedom and their own claims to modernity. Could one remember slavery without recalling the history of emancipation? Could one experience progress while relying on another to remain in a picturesque past? Whereas Ralph and his illustrators sublimated slavery in the history national progress with painterly touches, and whereas Eickemeyer and his critics elevated slavery out of history as a modern aesthetic object, Cram and her brother found themselves reaching for more surreal visual idioms to cohere the contradictions into a viable view. What emerges from her travelogue is a picture of how one young American thing was both drawn to and created a memory of slavery from the standpoint of her own modern self-fashioning.

For Cram, the fulfilment of self, of art, and of the nation could be focused together in her eye. She composed *Old Seaport Towns of the South* as a narrative that linked her movement through visual space with the development of a picture of national progress. In her opening scene, she and her brother stood “on the edge of Broadway,” apprehensive about leaving behind “all the things we liked best—friends, fun, work, New York.” She was also leaving behind the thrilling modern sensorium of light and color. Broadway was a “rainbow”: “Electric signs dripped in liquid sheets or burst into fiery spray.... Lights blinked, glittered, exploded in multi-coloured pinwheels, ran up and down and dizzily around, shot into the sky, fell in a shower of prismatic sparks.”⁶⁶ But like Ralph and thousands of other middle-class tourists she hoped that travel would restore to her a well-composed picture of “the living heart...the ‘rest of America.’” She herself would be a kind of portable multimedia recording device, less a “wax-coated phonograph record” than an iPhone *avant la letter*, “ready to receive the myriad impressions that

⁶⁶ Mildred Cram, *Old Seaport Towns of the South* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1917), 1.

will carve little hair-lines all over my receptive brain, recording colours and voices, the smell of the sea, the drift of the clouds and the sun on a garden wall.”⁶⁷ At stake for Cram was less to escape from modernity than to make sense of the modern “spectacle of force...within our optic capabilities”:

The might of machinery, the movement of railways and ships, digging down in the earth and building up in the sky are all manifestations of material force—majestic, superb, visible manifestations of that hidden inner force which is the imperishable urge of the living spirit to creation.⁶⁸

What was needed was a wholly new visual form that could bring coherence to the creative spirit of modernity rather than the fragmented compositions of the modernist artists she knew in Greenwich Village: “they splash rainbows in interpretation, achieving nothing but a contortion of past art!”⁶⁹ Paradoxically, Cram thought, Americans had to “focus our mind myopically” in order to see “the whole of America” and the epic drama of its “struggle for power and still more power, bigness and still more bigness, riches and still more riches,” surpassing the building of the Pyramids and the travels of Ulysses.⁷⁰ To see the whole of the American epic she focused her eyes myopically on the South.

What she expected to see was black service—and in the starkest terms. Although she claimed ancestry in “our native South” (she was born in Washington, D.C.), she grew up in New York remembering the region “through parental reminiscences, a place of sun, chivalry, and Uncle Remus.” Yet to recapture this memory she also meant to establish her racial difference to its denizens. Out the outset of her journey, she affirmed this difference by filtering her own memories of her family’s black cook through the lens of blackface burlesque. When her cook claimed that her grandparents had once belonged to a Cram plantation—“we-all’s the same

⁶⁷ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns of the South*, 5.

⁶⁸ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 7-8.

⁶⁹ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 10.

⁷⁰ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 9-10.

family!”—Cram recoiled into the surety of chromatic contrast: she could not be family because “she was as black as the ace of spades, as black as a bottle of ink, as black as soot.” Her denial of familial relationship did not prevent Cram from laying hold of that “bit of information to overawe” her employee in order to “sett[le] domestic problems, and domestics.”⁷¹ Unlike James and Ralph, Cram was neither fascinated nor troubled by the site of coerced black labor. Cram constructed a racism at once more viciously personal and coldly abstract; it could displace her personal connection to the history of slavery onto a timeless racial order. As she and her brother debated the merits of modernist aesthetics in a Baltimore-bound traincar, they found comfort by imitating a “darkey” conundrum from the minstrel show (“I ain’t askin’ you is you ain’t. . . . I’s e askin’ you ain’t you *is!*”), an evasion that also betrayed the source of her trouble: the mystery of racial difference that at once gave form to her disordered vision also blinded her to a spectacle of force embedded in the history of slavery.⁷² Such preliminary minstrel performances by the siblings set the tone for more unsettling encounters to come.

As Cram’s sense of difference nearly disintegrated in the South, she and her brother divided the labor of seeing. She took her keynote from tourist brochures that encouraged visitors to “Keep your eye on the South!” Yet she found that the very thing that drew her to the South made it hard to focus. Keeping your eye on the South meant focusing at once of “the old South and the new, as different as night and day.”⁷³ To capture this difference, and in addition to her “wax-cylinder” mind, Cram reached for a camera, and her brother a sketchbook. They tried their best. Cram used the camera as much as a social token as a documentary and aesthetic device. “‘Photograph’ is the international Esperanto of friendliness,” she observed, and she used it to create occasions to meet the locals, such as a group of Greek laborers in Tampa who “leaped to

⁷¹ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 3-4.

⁷² Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 11.

⁷³ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 7.

get into the picture.” But the snapshots themselves weren’t very good: “Nothing appeared on the developed film but a bottle and ten toes. Instead of a peaceful *genre*, we had photographed what looked like the fevered imaginings of a spiritual *séance*.”⁷⁴ Mildred’s unintentional surrealism was matched by her brother’s intentional cubism. In New Orleans’s Italian market, Allan painted a watercolor sketch with “cubistic swirls and whirligigs of colour.” Whether the “daub of red” represented the “Signora Romano of the vegetable stand” or “the wheel of the carriage that stands outside” was debated by the locals who looked on. Allan produced a new picture in the crude realism of “an Art Students’ League chromo” and raved their delight.⁷⁵ Rather than providing a coherent view of national progress from the “rest of America,” her camera and her brother’s sketchpad produced images as surreal as a Manhattan streetscape, as abstract as a cubist painting. In these images the sense of difference that Cram hoped would order history into progress gave way to history itself. In a Savannah bookstore, she was so overwhelmed by the volumes about the history of the city—from colonial settlement to “The Reconstruction”—she asked her brother, “pitifully,” “to take me to the movies.” The movies “served to drive great anxieties (such as the history of Savannah) out of my mind.”⁷⁶

The history that vexed her was the history of slavery. Its memory beckoned as a time that could restore the order of difference to her sight; yet it also repelled her as the moment when her fate, and the nation’s, became entwined with black America. She and Allan circled around it like a gyre, “skipp[ing] lightly over Savannah” and its history in a car, “driving very fast when we came to historic ground and ‘just creeping’ when there was nothing to learn.” They were only able to see the Hermitage plantation grounds at the initiative of their hired “chocolate-coloured”

⁷⁴ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 219-20.

⁷⁵ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 312-14. Meanwhile, Mildred took a snapshot of “the biggest roach I have ever seen” (312).

⁷⁶ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 143-44.

chauffer, who figured in Cram's account of the episode as a lens that both orders and disorders her racialized view of the scene. On the one hand, he played the part of the perfectly subordinate racial other, "so in love with his own hue that he had duplicated it in his clothes, achieving a *camouflage* which must have made him invisible on the shady side of the street." On the other hand, his pride in his appearance bespoke a modern wage relation outside the comfort of domestic service; he was "averse to being polite, as if good manners were in some mysterious way a surrender to the superiority of the white race." Thus for the Crams he provided an ideal passage to the history of slavery and the wrong angle from which to see it:

... We told him to skip lightly over Savannah and left him to his own devices. And while I cannot believe that he was being intentionally subtle when he turned out of the city and took us to the old Hermitage plantation, it is true that he let us see all that is left of the tragic past of his people.

Tragic—yes, and incomparably romantic.⁷⁷

Cram's chauffer captured her desire for tragedy and romance into an economy of memory: the closer she got to the picturesque image of slavery the more she had to pay in money and sense. To compel a former slave to recite stories from "befo' the wah," Cram "held out the coin and the old woman's smooth, cold fingers closed over mine like a monkey's paw." As for the "howling mob" of black children who sought donations for their plantation dancing, Cram would "never forget that strangeness of the tiny, black baby hand that closed over my fingers and the pennies." Cram recoiled from the commercial exchange—and the very human touch—that the ex-slave and the young child inserted into the performance of the picturesque.⁷⁸

What the Crams saw on their tour—and what it seems their driver was actively curating for them—was not only a different sense of race but a different history of progress and a different way to see it. Only when the Crams could free themselves from the chauffer and the

⁷⁷ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 147.

⁷⁸ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 150, 152.

modern denizens of the Hermitage could they see the image they wanted: a picturesque untouched by progress, and a progress innocent of history. The sight of the “Big House” was “the chimera we had been pursuing all the way from New York...captured at last.”⁷⁹ For Cram, the Hermitage was “the picture of that vanished past which has come to be so real”: a reality that required a long citation to the fictional works of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page, among others. But it also required adopting a view that suppressed the photographic. Cram asked her readers to imagine the scene painted “with the beautiful intricacy of Leonardo da Vinci’s fresco[s],” a “cool and leafy avenue like men and women in a Gaston La Touche canvas.”⁸⁰ The references to the Renaissance master and the contemporary French salon coupled their nostalgia for the plantation legend with the nostalgia for an anti-modern vision. It is thus telling how much Allan Cram’s sketch of the scene—“A Magnificent Avenue of Live Oaks”—registered the breakdown of modern vision around slavery (fig. 3.11). Whereas Hitchcock and Walker had refracted the photographic view through the painterly hand, Cram not only erased any black figures from the scene but also flattened it of any depth, the trees and avenue rendered in empty white space that dissolved any difference between figure and ground. The flatness of the image reflected the fragility of the Crams’s vision. Against the notes of modernity, from the cash exchange to the “purring” of the chauffer’s “big motor,” the Crams must “shut our eyes...to see.”⁸¹ Cram’s restless chauffer again broke from the prescribed route to tour the New Yorkers around Savannah’s up-and-coming black community filled with its neat houses and well-dressed denizens. Cram was chastened. “[W]e realized that we were wrong and that the chocolate chauffer was right. We had been demanding an eternal raggedness and poverty

⁷⁹ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 146-48.

⁸⁰ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 148-49.

⁸¹ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 149.

and picturesque ignorance for our own purely aesthetic enjoyment,” she wrote. “Progress is not beautiful in its material aspect unless we realize the urge of the spirit behind it.”⁸²

From there brother and sister Cram merrily “skipped over the rest of Savannah” and continued southward to Florida. What view did Cram suppress? What might have their snapshots looked like and how might their readers have looked at them? We must imagine Mildred Cram taking snapshots of her own as she toured the Hermitage. (The only time she seemed to put her camera down as at the instruction of a Naval Officer in Norfolk.) While flights of fancy could free the imagination, it betrayed the slavery as a limit to the visual emancipation promised by the camera, an emancipation that George Eastman had linked to a nostalgic sense of innocence, and Stieglitz to the picturesque representation of the modern. What the Crams attempted to unsee was not only the tragedy of slavery in the nation’s past, but its entwinement with the nation’s progress—the ruins of slave huts and the surviving ex-slaves, along with the sight of African American progress that seemed to mirror the Crams’ own and lay claim, by touch, on her conscience.

Ultimately she failed in her attempt to find a visual form that could contain the whole nation on the move, let alone recognize her chauffer as a fellow American Young Thing. As their steamer “tak[es] us to reality” at the end of their journey, Cram restored visual order by recourse to the old picturesque cliché: “we passed out of the brilliant South” and into a “colourless” North and a New York now “shrouded in the gentle snow.”⁸³ In doing so she forgot not only the rainbow of Broadway that she departed from but also the problem of race that beguiled her “optic capability” to witness the force of American power while affirming clear distinctions between North and South, white and black. In advertisements Dodd & Mead paired *Seaports*

⁸² Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 154.

⁸³ Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, 369.

with Anna Alice Chapin's *Greenwich Village*, also illustrated by Allan Cram.⁸⁴ Just as American moderns wanted to imagine a part of modern Manhattan as a picturesque "Latin Quarter," so did they venture South to imbue their modern moment with a depth of borrowed experience. Not unlike Henry James in Manhattan (or in Richmond), Cram travelled less out of nostalgia for a past than, in the words of historian Nick Yablon, out of "nostalgia for the very possibility of nostalgia, a longing for a time when time itself had depth and coherence."⁸⁵ Her failure to do so can be measured somewhat by her book's critics who enjoyed it precisely as a thing. *The Bookman* (Dodd & Mead's own literary magazine) trumpeted it as a "delightful book" issued "in most attractive form."⁸⁶ For *The Dial* "the book, as a whole, though unsubstantial and inconsequential, is an interesting and honest account of a new experience."⁸⁷

Nevertheless her experience is instructive. In her attempt to claim slavery for the memory of the modern self, Cram points to a dynamic that shaped how Americans would compose themselves through real and imagined journeys to the South on the backs of postcards.

V. Roses in Full Bloom

In the spring of 1914, a woman in a Harlem received a postcard from a friend who was touring the South (fig. 3.12). On the verso, the writer repeated what was by then a familiar cliché of Southern tourism: "New Orleans is different, in so many ways, from any other American city. We are enjoying the sights and it is [a] nice summer. Roses in full bloom." Other tourists—Henry James and Julian Ralph, Rudolf Eickemeyer and Mildred Cram—said the same of the cities of Richmond and Charleston, and the plantations of Alabama and Georgia: the South was America

⁸⁴ See, for instance, full-page Dodd & Mead ad in *The Atlantic Monthly* 120 (Dec. 1917), 987; and *The Nation* 105 (Nov. 29, 1917), xxx.

⁸⁵ Yablon, *Untimely Ruins*, 261.

⁸⁶ Arthur M. Chase, "Travel in War Time," *The Bookman* 46 (Nov. 1917), 335. Chase praised Cram's book above what he considered to be Julian Street's more formulaic travelogue to the South, *American Adventures* (1917).

⁸⁷ Review of Cram, *Old Seaport Towns*, in *The Dial* (Dec. 6, 1917), 592.

with a difference, in sights, climate, and foliage. On the recto, however, the postcard depicted in crudely colored tints another difference, but one was less amenable to the idea of America. This was “The Old Slave Block in the Old St. Louis Hotel,” where, the printed caption informed, the woman standing underneath the dilapidated awning of “was sold for \$1500.00...when a little girl.”⁸⁸

“The Old Slave Block” was a strikingly blunt issue of a widespread cultural form that migrated from travelogues to stereographs to modernist art and now to postcards: a photograph of the present that alluded to the memory of slavery while ensuring a sense of progress. Along with hundreds of issues of “picturesque” portrayals of ex-slaves, “darkies,” and “pickaninnies” in former slave markets, cotton fields, and “negro cabins,” this postcard can be counted as a banal and public doppelganger to the ghoulish photo-postcards of lynching victims that circulated illicitly yet readily outside of the US postal system. Indeed it is easy to overlook these postcards “of” slavery as simply another manifestation of American racial kitsch, at best, and hateful racist caricature, at worst. Hateful they were, and hateful they remain. But what desires sustained this hate on the part of these Northern correspondents? What value did they earn from it, and what needs did it satisfy? As James, Ralph, Eickemeyer, and Cram have shown, such juxtapositions posed as many problems to the eye as they solved. While a postcard raises more questions than it can answer about what its sender and recipient thought about the image on it, the materiality of the postcard itself clarifies the cultural context in which Americans attempted to fix slavery in their dreams of progress.⁸⁹ In a postcard, by then the apogee of the photograph’s mass reproduction and commercialization, Americans constructed memories of slavery in correspondence with the new constructions of selves enabled by the reach of one arm of the

⁸⁸ C. D. W. to Mrs. C. C. Hurston (New York, NY), 2 April 1914, in Randolph Linsly Simpson Collection, James Weldon Johnson Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁸⁹ I follow the methodological approach to postcards developed in Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 266 and *passim*.

culture industry into everyday social life. On the backs of circulating photographs, Americans learned to extend themselves via a curiously modern commodity, “half-private, half-public, neither the one, nor the other.”⁹⁰ In other words, postcards like the Old Slave Block help to show how and why Americans attempted to recuperate the plantation as they navigated the new channels of social experience in commodity culture.

The postcard began to eclipse the stereograph as the premier photographic commodity around 1899, when the US Congress legalized the private sale and distribution of picture postcards through the US mail. The postcard allowed for an unprecedented mass circulation of visual matter to anywhere reachable by regular mail, which by then was virtually everywhere thanks to the institution of Rural Free Delivery in 1893. By 1908, when the *Washington Post* prognosticated that the “Postcard Craze is Dying,” over 600 million postcards passed through the postal system. By 1913, at the peak of the postcard craze, it was nearly a billion. The postcard was a testament both to the ascent of the photograph as a medium of visual communication and of the industrial and commercial organization that could reproduce it in huge quantities and nearly on demand. The Old Slave Block, for instance, was likely sold by a New Orleans merchant who would have commissioned a local photographer to take snapshots of the local sights, perhaps using George Eastman’s Kodak 3A (two dollars in 1903) which printed directly onto postcard-sized negatives. From here the merchant could send the negatives via a local agent to distant publishers in New York or Germany for developing, coloring, and printing—this one chose the Acmeograph Company in Chicago—who would also number the set (5264) and affix the descriptive label.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 62.

⁹¹ “Postcard Craze Is Dying,” *Washington Post* (Dec. 27, 1908), 12. This story of the postcard’s production is based on accounts in Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 274-75; Howard Woody, “International Postcards: Their History,

With its cheap color tint job and rough labeling, the Old Slave Block was on the lower end of the postcard market. But even on this scale the postcard opens a view onto the social transformations spurred by the rise of photography and the expansion of the culture industry more generally. For the “amateur with small camera,” such as the photographer the Old Slave Block, the postcard provided access to technologies of mass reproduction and inroads to a national marketplace of eager consumers.⁹² What is more, the postcard allowed for new modes of social discourse that challenged and excited its consumers. Of course, the postcard craze provoked typical protests from cultural conservatives who bemoaned the degradation of “the art of polite correspondence” and eagerly anticipated the passing of the fad.⁹³ These critics tended to miss the tantalizing relations between self and society that the postcard commodity enabled.

What made the “craze” objectionable to official morality—and such an elusive target of state censorship—was precisely what made them such a compelling medium of communication: they were open secrets. In the case of very “obscene, indecent, or improperly suggestive” cards, a category that ranged from pornography to lynching scenes, the identity of both manufacturer and sender were “secret,” leaving the post office no recourse but to trash the card in the Dead Letter Office in lieu of “bring[ing] the guilty persons to trial.”⁹⁴ Whereas the postcard eluded state control, its mass circulation provoked anxieties about privacy and informal means of social coercion. For one couple, “apparently unconscious” of their stolen kiss being photographed by a

Production, and Distribution (Circa 1895 to 1915),” in Christraud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb, eds., *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998): 13-45; Paul J. Vanderwood and Frank N. Sampenoro, *Border Fury: A Picture Postcard Record of Mexico's Revolution and U.S. War Preparedness, 1910-1917* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 1-14; Hal Morgan and Andreas Brown, *Prairie Fires and Paper Moons: The American Photographic Postcard: 1900-1920* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1981), esp. 187-90 for dating methods.

⁹² “Profit in Post Cards: Present Craze Opens Field to Amateur with Small Camera,” *Washington Post* (Sept. 29, 1907), E8.

⁹³ Tom P. Morgan, “The Great Post Card Craze,” *Puck* (May 16, 1906), 10.

⁹⁴ “Will Censor Post Cards: New Craze that is Harassing Postmasters All Over Country,” *Washington Post* (Sept. 30, 1905), 1; “Pictures of Lynching: Postmaster Holds Up Souvenir Post Cards Showing Grewsome [sic] Work,” *Washington Post* (Aug. 15, 1906), 4.

local postcard entrepreneur, the resulting “widely-distributed” postcard not only cost the woman her job but “hurried” her secret affair into a marriage. “The card is now being sent over the country.”⁹⁵ These fears co-existed with excitement. On the level of social practice, to receive a postcard meant deciphering as much of the intentions of the sender as possible from the oblique visual message. Quickly, the postcard became popularly associated with and used for modern romance—less a stage in formal courtship than a feint in a new game of casual dating. One short story in the *Chicago Tribune* turned on the premise of the thrill and the risk of a young man sending a young woman a “picturesque” postcard whose ironic visual content she might “misunderstand.”⁹⁶ Or as a more hopeful limerick advised: “Buy a postal with a picture of a bottle large of glue. She surely cannot doubt it: she’ll know how you feel about it, for printed on the card is this: ‘Dear one, I’m stuck on you.’”⁹⁷ In an essay for *Cosmopolitan*, no lesser authority than consummate traveler—and human camera—Julian Ralph celebrated the “Postal-Card Craze” not only for the aesthetic variety it added to travel but also for extending “friendly feeling” between people and even nations. “Nothing better illustrates the growth in importance of the United States and the friendly feeling on the part of foreigners,” he wrote from Europe in 1902, “than the fact that I found President McKinley’s portrait common to every national collection of cards.”⁹⁸

What “friendly feeling” did the incongruous figure of the ex-slave help to forge between sender and recipient? Although the tone of the message on the Old Slave Block seems more amiable than romantic, it was of a piece with postcards that linked racialized figures to mass communication. In thousands of postcards the comic, servile, degraded “coon” was conjured as a

⁹⁵ “Marriage Hurried by Post Card,” *Washington Post* (Jan. 30, 1908), 6.

⁹⁶ H. L. Mortimer, “The Romance of the Picture Post Card,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Feb. 5, 1905), G7.

⁹⁷ “The Post Card Craze,” *Boston Daily Globe* (Aug. 4, 1907), SM8; reprinted from *New York Evening Sun* (n.d.).

⁹⁸ Julian Ralph, “The Postal-Card Craze,” *Cosmopolitan* (Feb. 1902), 426.

part of a broader racist pedagogy in which white children were taught of their mastery and black children of their inferiority. Southern uncles and granddads sent nephews, nieces, and grandchildren pictures of African American children at work in cotton fields: “Grandpa thought you would like a little nigger to play with”; “This is what children do in the South.”⁹⁹ The racist voice of the New South was hardly incompatible with the sociability and the ironic voice enabled by the postcard.

What underpinned this racist pedagogy, however, was the postcard’s own work in transforming the form and meaning of communication. In addition to transmitting racism across regions and generations, postcard senders also used race as a substitute for something less communicable about how their own selves were moving and changing through time and space. When southbound Northerners used postcards to write back home they liked most of all to express their motion. In their choice of postcards they transformed scenes of the New South into accessories of the agile middle class. From the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond one tourist cast a discerning eye on New South pretensions while claiming a place within the process of development: “Inside the square is where *we* reside. This Hotel is fine but not yet completed. This is a most interesting city.”¹⁰⁰ What had been a stultifying modernism for Henry James could be a symbolically rich backdrop for modern leisure. Underneath a placid view of the Lee Monument, with telegraph poles on the horizon, a college boy wrote to his sweetheart at Smith College: “They beat us 12-0. Game was fine. Mr. Bick coming. Day is fine and Richmond isn’t too hot.”¹⁰¹ By attaching the blithe message to the sanctified ground of General Lee, the young

⁹⁹ Brooke Baldwin, “On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 22.3 (Winter 1988): 15-28, quotations on 19. Although Baldwin’s essay remains valuable for scholars of race and material culture for her rich uncovering of verso messages on racist postcards, the postcards themselves are unfortunately uncited.

¹⁰⁰ A. S. N. to Mrs. Natt Head, 30 Apr. 1907 (New York: A. C. Bosselman & Co., n.d.), in Post-AAS.

¹⁰¹ Jack to Miss Bertha E. Chrishausen (Smith College, Northampton, Mass.), 14 Oct. 1905 in Post-AAS.

man was accruing extra meaning not simply for his temporary association with an authentically historical location, but his ease among regional difference and monumental scale. Like the postcard writer who would later pick out the gigantic Lee Monument to send from the nearby Shenandoah Hotel, Northern tourists used the Confederate hero to transmit not yearning for the Old South but cosmopolitan enjoyment of disproportions and incongruities.

Even the most permanent remnants of the Old South became temporary souvenirs to the sender's mobility. While postcards informed readers that the Old Market in downtown Charleston was a hub for the city's antebellum prosperity and was now a "relic room" for the United Daughters of the Confederacy, they commonly presented the building itself nestled among parked cars and gathering tourists. This juxtaposition of antebellum relic and modern motion suited the image of Charleston projected by its white elite: a bulwark against modernity meant to attract tourist dollars.¹⁰² But those tourists in turn used the postcard of the Old Market to announce their own mobility. One wrote to Ms. S. Chester Lynn in Pittsfield, Mass., that this was his "Last card on my way."¹⁰³ "This is one of the interesting places to see. So many pristine points of interest I've visited many churches," another wrote to Miss C. A. Burbank in Worcester. "Sail for New York Sunday AM. Home Tuesday night."¹⁰⁴ When traveling to Atlanta another tourist's weightless movement seemed to merge with the effortless growth of the New South metropolis. On a bird's-eye view of the flat iron skyscraper in Buckhead neighborhood, a traveler reassured Henry back in Gardner: "I expect to start for home next week the 16th."¹⁰⁵

This genial and almost flippant tone was attached to views seemingly untouched by New South development and painted with the golden hues of the picturesque. On the back of a

¹⁰² See Yuhl, *Golden Haze of Memory*.

¹⁰³ To Ms. S. Chester Lynn (Pittsfield, Mass.), 5 April 1915, in Post-AAS.

¹⁰⁴ To Miss C. A. Burbank (Worcester, Mass.), 26 April 1923, in Post-AAS.

¹⁰⁵ L. J. W. to Mr. Henry Cullester (?) (Gardner, Mass.), 11 Sept. 1913, in Post-AAS.

postcard of the slave cabins at the Hermitage Plantation near Savannah, Georgia, one Margaret wrote to Harvard that she was “Having a nice trip” (fig. 3.13).¹⁰⁶ Another, sending a view of the Hermitage’s “Old Mansion” to San Gabriel: “Happy new year & very cordial regards.”¹⁰⁷ Of black cotton pickers in South Carolina, to Brookline: “Having a lovely time” (fig. 3.14).¹⁰⁸ Of the old slave market in St. Augustine to someone addressed as “Dearest Lawrence” in New Haven: “We expect to be home Friday P.M. some time—Hope to see you Sat—Then more of this glorious place.”¹⁰⁹ While they certainly did not question the South’s idyllic nostrums of the “old plantation” and “happy darkies,” Northern tourists used these postcards to conduct their own modernity; the slave blocks and ruined estates served as ephemeral backdrops to their own self-fashioning as savvy travelers for the folks back home in Massachusetts, New York, and California. Indeed it could continue to serve this function even when the sender was no longer near the original site. In at least one instance the memory of slavery helped to make Friday night plans between two office workers in Massachusetts. Whether she had visited the Hermitage plantation or simply collected the card, one Carrie used a color-tinted image of “Old Slave Cabins” to tell Clara A. Ward in Northfield: “What a fine snow storm. I did not go to the office last night it was so stormy. Suppose I shall see you Friday night.”¹¹⁰

Through postcards, travelers folded the memory of slavery into a new mode of self-performance. Rather than ground their selves in an intrinsic character, modern Americans could project their selves as surface personalities mediated by the growing variety of printed visual matter available on the marketplace. In this way, postcards can be seen as a kind of currency, a

¹⁰⁶ Margaret to Mrs. Arthur de Laugis (Harvard, Mass.), 27 Jan. 1930, in Post-AAS.

¹⁰⁷ Unknown to Dr & Mrs. G. W. Cole (San Gabriel, Cal.), 1 Jan. 1924, Post-AAS.

¹⁰⁸ S. G. Howard to Mrs. Annie S. Head (Brookline, Mass.), 16 Jan. 191?, Post-AAS.

¹⁰⁹ To G. L. Sampter (New Haven, Conn.), 30 March 1910, in Post-NYHS.

¹¹⁰ Carrie to Miss Clara A. Ward (Northfield, Mass.), 20 Feb. 1908 (Portland, ME: The Hugh C. Leighton Co., Manufacturers, n.d.) in Post-AAS.

medium through which the self could transmit its value in the mass market of images. Indeed, as early as 1860, photography enthusiast and Boston Brahmin Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., had declared the *carte de visite* the age's preeminent "social currency" for allowing the middle-class bourgeois to affirm their social membership through the exchange of photographic portraits. In postcards, by contrast, the traveler could distend herself through the evocation of distant times and places that the photograph represented. In this way, the postcard was less like a gold coin than paper money, for it did not so much represent a natural essence of a person as it made a promise on a future self—here now, back again later. It is perhaps not surprising that scenes of the "old plantation" and "happy darkies" appear so vibrantly and frequently in the postcard archive of metropolitan libraries: as signs of absolute difference, the racialized caricatures of the old plantation iconography had long helped Americans hedge their bets. When a burgeoning market economy created new need for paper currency, and spurred cultural anxieties about the nature of value, antebellum Southern banks and the Confederate treasury issued paper bills decorated with plantation iconography. Just as actual slaves held real value in the national economy, as Michael O'Malley argues, figurative slaves "could be imagined as a source of stable value, an intrinsic value, derived from their racial character, that in daily exchange played the same role as gold." Race appealed to white Northerners and Southerners in the postbellum era for the same reason. Indeed figures of slaves and slavery continued to provide a cultural security to financial instruments well after the war, spanning the postbellum era from \$1000 gold bonds of the Louisiana, Shreveport and Houston Railway Company (1884) to stock certificates of the Delaware, San Francisco Textile Mills Inc.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Michael O'Malley, *Face Value: The Entwined Histories of Money & Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 45-46. For examples of slave plantation scenes and figures of slaves on Confederate currency, see John M. Coski and Jules d'Hemecourt, curators, "Beyond Face Value: Depictions of Slavery in Confederate Currency," exhibit held at Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; online:

Even as tourists experimented with the postcard to project themselves across space and time, they too perhaps banked on references to plantation “darkies” to guarantee an absolute value amid the speculations of self-fashioning. As literary critic Susan Stewart argues, the postcard not only distilled the local history and culture into a mass-produced commodity; it “moves history into private time,” allowing the sender to carry the view with her and exchange it with another as a gift, a “receipt” as much for the authenticity of the original view as for the sender who was there. It thus abstracts the relationship to the original site (the photographed scene) while supplementing it with a material substitute (the postcard itself) along with the sender’s story inscribed on the verso.¹¹² With these postcards, American moderns could not only announce their whiteness but also their solidity as they risked a piece of themselves to the circuits of cultural commerce. As the figures of slaves in these postcards marked a racial difference, they also evoked a secret sharer of the postcard user: a fully reified self, its authentic racial aura a displaced reference to an eradicated regime of human commodification.

The Old Slave Block postcard suggests how the figure of the slave could have stabilized the social commerce between two friends even as that commerce was being fractured and reordered within the culture industry. Indeed it is hard to look at this postcard without seeing the sinister continuity it weaves between the time the woman was sold and the present when her

<http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?p=566> (accessed March 2, 2015). For the poetics and political economy in which people could turn the alienating commodity form—exemplified in paper currency as “tokens of value without material referents, inherent limits, or external moorings”—into theatrical and potentially emancipatory performances of self, see James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (1994; rev. ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 146-54.

¹¹² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 138. For the postcard as a paradoxically private and public message, see Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also discussion of the postcard “craze” as a precursor to present-day social media in Lynda Klich and Benjamin Weiss, *The Postcard Age: Selections from the Leonard C. Lauder Collection* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 35-47.

image was sold as a postcard and transformed into an authentic value for the mobile self.¹¹³ But its crude execution provides further clues to understand the fascination and even use that drew white Americans to such images. The process by which the Acmeograph Co. would have assembled the Old Slave Block told the story of how mechanical reproduction was both reifying vision and creating new visual sensations. The color-tinted postcard was made by subdividing the black and white photograph into separate zones of color, which would then be hand-colored by women and children workers in four to ten different hues, and then recombined again in sheets of 30 or 40. The process, as historian Howard Woody writes, “in effect fractured an image into successive arrangements of colored shards.”¹¹⁴ Not unlike the garish tinting job of a lynching postcard that would amplify the disfigurement of the victim’s maimed body, this color-tinted postcard of the ex-slave obscures her face under a heavy wash of black ink. Thus this postcard drew in its buyer with a dual movement. On the one hand, it offered to displace the reification of the viewer’s self onto a historical origin of intrinsic and “natural” value, a person for sale. On the other hand, however, it compensated the viewer for the lack of history in the scene with the abstraction of sheer color and the absolute of race itself. At the heart of this dynamic was the figure of the woman that the postcard positioned as a sign of an authentic past that was no longer there; her effacement not only obscured her historicity in the abstraction of race, but also compensated for the viewer’s own reified social vision with sheer color.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Art historian Krista Thompson eloquently argues this point in relation to photographs of black workers in turn-of-the-century Jamaican sugar plantations and their (mis)use by both contemporaries and subsequent historians as photographs “of” slavery: “The use of photographs in contemporary historical accounts do not simply posit connections between the slavery days of old and the purported New Jamaica, but highlight the very medium through which a contiguity was maintained, the means through which a social overseeing and bodily regulation of blacks would continue to be carried out: the medium of photography itself”; “The Evidence of Things Not Photographed,” 63.

¹¹⁴ Woody, “International Postcards,” 21; Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 270.

¹¹⁵ For an apt reading of the place of lynching photography in shaping the cultural form of modern vision as an object of abstract, even sublime, limit to sight itself, see Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 279-81. For the materialist history of the senses and the compensatory function of sheer color, see Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious*:

With the postcard, tourists could turn a nostalgic yearning for slavery into a utopian aspiration for consumerist plenitude.¹¹⁶ Thus postcards of Southern skyscrapers and idyllic plantations complemented those of black agricultural labor as images of abundance: the old plantation produced a pastoral harvest along with a consumable image of pastoral time. Many wrote on the verso of these cards about the conjoined pleasures of consuming fruit and consuming a past marked aside by race. Mrs. Nicholson writing to Maine about the amount of grapefruits she eats a day (4 to 5) on the back of a postcard depicting black strawberry pickers.¹¹⁷ No doubt more than one traveler earnestly believed that pictures like “Southern Products: Water Melons, Razer Backs, and Pickaninnies” represented “a typical Southern scene during summer,” or one of a cotton press demonstrating “how they [black workers] bale up the cotton.”¹¹⁸ To be sure, a part of consuming the South was consuming blackness. In a postcard depicting a black woman on an ox-cart (“Mammy Going to Market”), the writer alluded to the scene in passing (“A common team here”) before assuring Mrs. G. S. Minot of Sommerville, Mass., that he had arrived safely in Jacksonville and was on his way to Tampa, “Fresh fruits and vegetables fine.”¹¹⁹ “Having a fine time,” C. R. C. wrote back to Worcester from New Orleans underneath a picture of black workers cutting sugar cane, even as the card’s label—a part of the “Under Southern Skies” series—informed the reader that US sugar production was losing its dominance on the

American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 241-43; Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 229-30, 236-37; Walter Benjamin, “A Child’s View of Color” (1914-15), trans. Rodney Livingstone, in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Selected Writings*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), 1:50-51.

¹¹⁶ Jeffery L. Meikle, “A Paper Atlantis: Postcards, Mass Art, and the American Scene,” *Journal of Design History* 13.4 (2000), 279. Meikle explores this utopian dimension of a later era of postcard production by the Teich company during the Depression:

¹¹⁷ Mrs. Nicholson to Miss Christina Hendrick (Bridgeton, Maine), 10 Feb. 1917, in box 1, Hoffman-Boaz Collection.

¹¹⁸ Mrs. S. to Mrs. W. A. Waldersee [?] (Providence, R.I.), n.d., in box 1, Hoffman-Boaz African American Postcard Collection, NMAH-SI; Aunt Minnie to Miss Gladys A. Backus (Jersey City, NJ), 4 Feb. 1908, in “Amusements” series, box 2, folder 29, Warshaw Collection, NMAH-SI.

¹¹⁹ To Mrs. G. S. Minot (Sommerville, Mass.), 3 Jan. 1907 (no. 6472; Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., 1902), in Post-AAS.

world market due to “the instability of labor.”¹²⁰ The tourist was visiting New Orleans at just the moment when Louisiana’s African American political leaders and agricultural workers continued to advocate for the rights they had lost with the recent constitutional establishment of Jim Crow. One local white researcher had complained to the US Department of Labor about the agitation of black sugarcane workers, who held “unfortunate notions of freedom” for desiring the “things they could not possess as slaves—guns, ponies, and the privilege of moving about.”¹²¹ For the moving Northern traveler, however, a fine time could be consumed like fine fruits because both time and fruit originated in a sight of black labor, arrested in space and in history.

The postcard of the old plantation bound white and African Americans together in the emerging mass cultural economy as consumers and producers of time. The dynamic blinded white American moderns from the countervisions of progress broadcast by the growing number of African Americans who were risking their futures on the “privilege of moving about.” We do not know much about the sender or the recipient about Old Slave Block postcard except the address it was sent to on Seventh Avenue above West 122nd Street, which census records inform was a boarding house in 1910 and a hotel by 1920. During this decade the surrounding block housed a mix of transient boarders and the working and lower middle classes: teachers, housekeepers, servants, salesladies and salesmen, restaurant managers, office clerks—all of them white.¹²² By 1930, the postcard recipient might very well have been among the 118,792 whites that left Harlem in the intervening decade as 87,417 African Americans arrived and remade the neighborhood into their own cosmopolitan dreams. Harlem would for many be a “homegrown

¹²⁰ C. R. C. to Mr. Erlich V. Hill(Worcester, Mass.), 11 March 1901 (“Under Southern Skies Series”; London: Raphael Tuck & Sons, n.d.), in Post-AAS.

¹²¹ J. Bradford Laws, “The Negroes of Cinclare Central Factory and Calumet Plantation, Louisiana,” *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* 38 (January 1902), 293-94; quoted in Rebecca J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 199; see also 189-200.

¹²² Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910, New York, Borough of Manhattan, Ward 12, ED 556, sheet 10A; Fourteenth Census of the United States 1920, New York City, Manhattan Borough, 19AD, ED 1324, sheet 18B. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

version of Paris,” as Ralph Ellison would put it. Of course, the Old Slave Block postcard likely blended into the same racism that provoked much of this white flight, a racism voiced by John G. Taylor, head of the Harlem Property Owners Improvement Corporation, who as early as 1911 advocated the creation of an extra-urban “colony” for the incoming “Negro invasion” that would resemble nothing less than a re-created agrarian plantation.¹²³ But in 1914 the recipient was herself in transit, perhaps embarking on her own adventure in a modern Manhattan. If the memory of slavery provided a form for her racism, it also provided a form for her to mediate her own progress through time and space. Along with stereographs, snapshots, and travelogues—to say nothing of the folklore vogue of the 1880s, the plantation spectacles of the 1890s—the postcard craze sanitized a memory of slavery while re forging the American attachment to blackness. At the dawn of the Jazz Age, postcards like the Old Slave Block helped to establish the mythical old plantation as an elsewhere for whites to sequester African Americans and the legacies of slavery—and as a stage to perform their own modernity.

VI. Seeing Modernity

In “Capitalism: Slavery” (2006), experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs transformed a stereograph of a Southern cotton plantation into a three-minute visual ordeal. Jacobs’s description is disarmingly quaint: “An antique stereograph image of cotton-pickers, computer-animated to present the scene in an active depth even to single-eyed viewers.”¹²⁴ But as his virtual camera pans around the zooms into the scene, interpolating the left and right frames of the stereograph in a pulsating slideshow, he creates a purposefully nauseating effect. Not only did Jacobs dislodge the plantation scene out of the timeless picturesque and into a present where the

¹²³ Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 311-12; Ralph Ellison quoted in *ibid.*, 311; John G. Taylor, *Harlem Home News* (July 1911), quoted in *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Ken Jacobs, “Capitalism: Slavery” (2006). Online: <http://vimeo.com/94001787>

tense relations among the cotton-pickers and overseer looming on horseback are forever activated yet unresolved. By transforming the illusion of depth in the stereograph into an illusion of time, Jacobs also short circuits the camera work that during the turn of the century had conflated Old and New South into a common pastoral idyll for visual consumption in the present.¹²⁵ Of course, Jacobs's film can be said to repeat this conflation, taking a photograph from the 1890s to stand for a photograph of slavery unavailable in the archive, an elision that speaks to the visual and structural continuities between the two regimes of racialized labor.¹²⁶ Rather than use the camera as a representation of the past, however, Jacobs demonstrates more pointedly how the camera itself produced the visual sense of historical difference that kept "slavery" a part from modernity. Jacobs's digital camera work undoes the work of the stereographer to turn the colon in "Capitalism: Slavery" into a palpable sensation: less an equation than a tense modulation of an eradicated past intertwined with the forward motion of capital.

"Yet we are the blind and led by the blind." For W. E. B. Du Bois, American blindness toward the place of slavery in the narrative of national progress was a product of that same progress. In "The Propaganda of History" (1935), Du Bois directed his ire against the professional historians who employed their authority and their science to degrade the humanity of African Americans and distort their role in the nation's history. But Du Bois was both a historian and an artist. All aesthetic representations of the nation's history in slavery and race must be, in Du Bois's capacious sense, "propaganda." ("I do not care a damn for any art that is

¹²⁵ My reading of "Capitalism: Slavery" as a representation of the camera's production of historical time is indebted to Brooke Belisle, "Depth Readings: Ken Jacobs's Digital, Stereographic Films," *Cinema Journal* 53.2 (Winter 2014): 1-26.

¹²⁶ See Thompson, "The Evidence of Things Not Photographed."

not used for propaganda,” Du Bois had thundered in *The Crisis* in 1926.)¹²⁷ So as he concluded this coda to his epic history of Reconstruction, which brought to center stage “the black worker, as founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world,” he described the national amnesia of the historical entwinement of racial bondage and material progress as a modern creation.¹²⁸ “Before the dumb eyes of ten generations of ten million children, it is made mockery of and spit upon...with aspiration and art deliberately and elaborately distorted.” While such distortions could be countered by historical research—indeed the cunning of Du Bois’s *Reconstruction* was to shed plain light on public and published archives—they were also deeply lodged in modern social experience. By 1935, the vision of the old plantation myth had become central to how white Americans conceived of their own place in a progressive historical trajectory. In this symbolic space Americans could “compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.”¹²⁹

Black Reconstruction butted up against a cultural economy of memory: an arena of value and power, human and technological, in which visions of past and future took shape. Du Bois wrote his epic drama of black slavery and freedom with a vision of the future in mind. It was a vision that linked the emancipation of African Americans to a wider human emancipation, a vision that had begun gestating in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and would be developed in the essays of *Darkwater* (1920). To ask why Americans were “blind” to the history of slavery and the promise of black freedom was thus to ask about the powerful attraction they had to “the exploitation of the dark proletariat” and the “Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in

¹²⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” *The Crisis* (Oct. 1926): 290-97, in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 514

¹²⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 727, 15.

¹²⁹ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 727.

cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal.”¹³⁰ But the photographs of the old plantation had showed that photography (a “secretion of the capitalist mode of production” into everyday life, as Kracauer conceived it) bore not only a new way of seeing but a new relationship to the culture industry as congealed in its automated gadget, the camera.¹³¹ Rather than redeem American vision, the photographs discussed here had converted the “surplus value” of the dark proletariat for a machine-made world. Its allure can be explained not only as a desire for lost human service, but as an awakening to life with machines.

¹³⁰ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 16.

¹³¹ Kracauer, “Photography,” 434.

4.

REANIMATING SLAVERY

One of the best-selling toys of the 1915 Christmas shopping season was also the consummation of a half-century of selling slavery. Drawing from the racial iconography of the blackface minstrel show, Tombo, “the Alabama Coon Jigger,” promised to reanimate the dancing of an old plantation slave in the form of a wind-up mechanical toy (fig. 4.1). Like a plantation spectacle, decorated folklore book, or postcard of the Old South, Tombo¹ traded on the symbolic values of a mythic old plantation, grounding its representation of black dance in a timeless pastoral past. Unlike these forms, Tombo created this value through neither the labor nor presence of an African American person—but through a system of interlocking springs, gears, and joints. Indeed, it seemed to call out for your own labor and presence to complete the fantasy. For the toy to move, you had to crank a wind-up clockwork mechanism that was connected to the toy’s body by an oscillating shaft. Once wound up and let go, the internal mechanism vibrated the shaft up and down, to and fro, in tension with the weight of the body, transmitting the motion to the arms and legs across a sequence of interlocking joints. You might order the resulting cacophonous motion into a rhythm by working a small brake lever on the side; or you could watch as your invested human energy dissipated through the toy’s works and it became a lifeless object once more. In order to use Tombo to activate a memory of the old plantation, you had to allow the toy to use up a part of you.

Tombo flew off the shelves. Even retailer extraordinaire John Wanamaker ran out of stock in his flagship department store in Philadelphia; he had to request an emergency supply

¹ Though advertisements would only nickname the Alabama Coon Jigger “Tombo” around 1920, I use it to name the toy throughout this chapter for the sake of brevity.

from his son's store in Manhattan.² Tombo crystalized the social relations of a now burgeoning economy of mass production and consumption. Though exact sales figures do not survive, receipts were good enough to propel its American manufacturer to a leading place in the toy industry. Bolstered by Tombo's success, Ferdinand Strauss incorporated his business and brazenly proclaimed himself the "founder of the mechanical toy industry in America." For a time he was selling 3,600,000 mechanical toys per year. Tombo was the face of the line.³ But, as the dynamics of its play suggest, Tombo must be seen as more than a product of corporate organization, industrial processes of assembly, and sophisticated networks of distribution. It was a plaything that immersed you into the organization, processes, and networks of a machine—an immersion with implications for how we understand the formation of race during the age of incorporation. In the duration of its dance, the mechanical reproduction of black cultural labor went hand-in-hand with the mechanization of the white consumer.

Tombo was far from the only black plaything on the marketplace, and its mechanical design was hardly revolutionary. It shared the shelves with plush Topsy-Turvy dolls and Tinker Toys, dancing monkeys and wind-up toy cars, mechanical banks and Erector Sets. Yet cultural historians have overlooked the particular form of the black mechanical dancing toy. Now a staple among Black Americana collectors (working ones for upwards of \$650, broken ones as low as \$71), even the hatefulness of Tombo's caricature can appear banal, its historical value depreciated relative to its commercial value as a kind of racist kitsch in antique auctions and on eBay.com. For their part, historians of American consumer culture have explained the

² William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 85-86, 86n61; Alison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 142.

³ For a sense of scale, the wholesale volume of toys sold in the US in 1919 was 70.17 million units. Richard O'Brien, *The Story of American Toys: from Puritans to the Present* (New York: Artabras, 1990), chap. 3, quotation on 82; Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 27-29.

appearance of toys like Tombo as reflections of Jim Crow racist ideology that manufacturers and retailers in this moment were all too eager to exploit. These arguments by Lizabeth Cohen and Grace Hale are salutatory for demonstrating the staying power of racism amid the expansion of consumer markets during the twentieth century.⁴ But because it crystalized a particularly nostalgic trope of plantation mythology in the form of a machine, Tombo presents further interpretive challenges to the cultural historian. Racist toys, memorabilia, and iconography did more than reflect prevailing racist ideologies; they provided the material through which people could tie the mundane performance of racial identities to large-scale processes of socioeconomic change. As people constructed race out of the visual and material stuff of everyday life, they in turn put that racial stuff to palpable and dexterous use as a medium to repair the dislocations of modernity. At the turn of the century, for white consumers did not simply seek racialized objects to affirm that superiority of their whiteness; they recommitted themselves to blackness, whether to affirm the boundaries between person and thing as commodity relations penetrated more deeply into everyday life, or to cast the routine habits of consumerism into fantasies of abundance (see, for example, fig. 4.2).⁵

Tombo poses additional questions about the use of the memory of the old plantation for the producers and consumers of an emerging mass cultural economy. What made Tombo so much more successful than any other black mechanical toy? What gave *this* representation of

⁴ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

⁵ For the case of racialized toys, see Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006): 175-207; Leora Auslander and Thomas C. Holt, "Sambo in Paris: Race and Racism in the Iconography of the Everyday," in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 147-84; Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994). For the visual and material construction of race more generally, see Matthew Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); and Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

race such mass appeal in *this* form of mechanical motion at *this* crossroad in American cultural history for *these* middle-class Northern urbanites? How the toy and its user (a child, a parent) interact to coordinate its play of race and mechanics to the broader arena of socioeconomic transformation—and resolve it all into some kind of durable meaning?

In this chapter I situate Tombo amid a broader cultural transformation of American conceptions and experiences of freedom that had been provoked by the power of corporate industry in everyday life, a power that was no longer simply expressed in the factory but increasingly in the home. I do so in six parts that not only recovers a dimension of technological utopianism in the dynamics of selling slavery, but also charts a singularly American cultural history from the era of slave emancipation to the machine age. In the first part, I trace Tombo's cultural genealogy to the symbol of the slave machine with which Americans, North and South, thought through the differences between slavery and freedom. In the second part, I show how this symbol was exploited with gusto by postbellum mechanical toy manufacturers of the Northeast who used it to ameliorate the anxieties of middle-class consumers about the mechanization of children's play. Yet, as I show in part three, the conditions for Tombo's success were not crystalized until World War 1, when the economic and cultural contingences of World War I heightened the value of mechanical toys as vehicles for transforming children into the technological leaders of a postwar nation. In the final two parts, I move to a more speculative mode of cultural analysis in order to capture how and with what effect the toy worked. I do so by reading Tombo's movements alongside other figurations of racialized mechanics: in adolescent psychology (G. Stanley Hall); and in contemporary receptions of African American urban culture (boxing, ragtime, and jazz).

Tombo pushed the processes of selling slavery to its symbolic and material limits: it extended their reach most intimately to the consciousness and body of its consumers. Tombo, made its reenactment of the old plantation contingent on the consumer's own labor in focusing mind and body on the works of a machine. Tombo thus joined not only mechanical toys but a menagerie of gadgets and aesthetic responses—from washing machines to exercise belts, from Jack Johnson's boxing to Man Ray's assemblages—through which Americans attempted to harness (and survive) the seemingly autonomous forces of an increasingly machine-made world.⁶ So did mechanical toys like Tombo raise doubts among consumers and critics of technological modernity. Did not mechanical toys rob children of the imaginative freedom of play?

We might see in Tombo not only a stand-in target for the violent racist impulses that raged during this period of socioeconomic change; and not only a degraded displacement of the emancipatory aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance or the egalitarian potential of jazz. It was these things precisely because it transformed this play of race and memory into a drama of mechanization. Hence it shows how racism was reproduced in the tumultuous structural formation of corporate industrial capitalism—a formation called nearly interchangeably, then and now, as the Machine Age and the Jazz Age.⁷

⁶ See Carolyn Thomas de la Peña, *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built the Modern American* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: the White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁷ For the centrality of play for organizing the turn-of-the-century cultural economy, see Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996). For the decentering and destabilizing play fundamental to the thinking of a structure, see Jacques Derrida, "Sign, Structure, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978): 278-93.

I. The Slave-Machine

The memory of slavery broadcast from theatrical spectacles to early cinema, in folklore books and in postcards, was an idyllic old plantation; Tombo was no different. But Tombo also traded on an idea of slavery in tension with the pastoral fantasy. Tombo represented the slave as a kind of machine. If white audiences would come to complain about the “machine-made coons” of the plantation spectacular, Tombo inverted the trope: the artificial African American actor was replaced by a naturally mechanical “coon.” Thus to understand Tombo’s cultural meaning and allure means to see it less as a memory of an original plantation than as part of a genealogy of a metaphor for slavery, a material discourse through which successive regimes of power “engrave[d] memories on things and even within bodies.”⁸ Of course, slaves and machines have been paired in Western thought since Aristotle; the one has stood as both opposite and substitute for the other.⁹ Since the antebellum period Americans thought about what slaves and machines *were* by the differences and similarities between them. Linking discourses of slavery and technology, and appearing in genres from dime novels to salon painting, the slave-machine was “good to think with,” providing a figure for Americans to imagine the differences and similarities between mechanical life and social death. In the age of slave emancipation, Americans used this metaphor not only to contrast slavery from freedom, but to describe the novel states of being shaped by the social relations of mass cultural production.

The symbolic association between slaves and machines helped to shape cultural responses to the concurrent formation of industrial capitalism and plantation slavery in antebellum United States. For the pro-slavery writers, slavery could be defended in terms of

⁸ See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), trans. D. Bouchard and S. Simon, in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 85.

⁹ Tim Armstrong surveys the key permutations of the “isomorphism between the slave and the machine” (71) in Continental and American thought in *The Logic of Slavery*, chap. 3.

productivity and humanity by conceiving of their fields as factories, their slaves as human machines—indeed more humane than a machine because they were an extension of the master’s will and a part of his “*familia*.”¹⁰ In the north, abolitionists and Yankee intellectuals thought about machines as kinds of slaves that could substitute for bonded human labor. Abolitionist Theodore Parker contrasted the technology used to “possess” the power of New England rivers with the power which “has taken men from Africa, and made them slaves.”¹¹ Yet even northerners sympathetic to abolitionism were wary of the impact of industrial technology on human freedom. Though he would elsewhere admire the potential of machines to liberate the American imagination from the toil of manual labor, Ralph Waldo Emerson equated the factory’s exploitation of nature and of women wage workers with slavery in his bucolic New England: “So [mill owners] buy slaves where the women will permit it; where they will not, they make the wind, the tide, the waterfall, the steam, the cloud, the lightening, do the work, by every art & device their cunningest brain can achieve.”¹² For the white working-class men who comprised the audience of the antebellum minstrel show, however, the machine was an even more ambivalent object of desire and fear. As they imitated the songs and dancing of black slaves, blackface minstrels also imitated the sounds of factory steam-whistles and trains and, in at least one instance, danced as a mechanical black automaton. In this guise, minstrels distilled working class ambivalence to slavery and capitalism: a black slave-machine that linked the fate of the

¹⁰ I make allusion less to the actual historical relationship between slavery and technology or Southern industrialization than the logic of slavery that made human slaves appear as machines, a logic driven by slaveholders’ tense appropriation of the spirit and material relations of liberal capitalism. See Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), esp. 162-75; Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 195-99; James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 155-91.

¹¹ Quoted in Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 149.

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gillman et al, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960-73), 10:102-3, quoted in Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine*, 124-5; see also 130-31.

black slave to that of the factory wage worker, while also presenting African Americans and machines alike as something to master.¹³

The black minstrel automaton was the obverse of the genuine plantation “negro,” and would continue to color audiences’ perceptions of the later “plant shows” in the form of the “machine-made coon” (as we saw in Chapter One). Yet such specters of racialized machines pointed to cultural problems in Northern urban industrial societies that resonated beyond the minstrel stage. While pro-slavery ideologues cast the slave-machine as an advertisement for the plantation’s natural racial order, their anti-slavery counterparts inverted the figure to demonstrate both the unnatural scandal of slavery and propose a natural place for industrial technology among free men. Addressing the political crisis of slavery and free labor in her melodramatic novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe registered these tensions by distinguishing the good technological machines of capitalism from the bad human machines of slavery, yet did so by defining freedom in no small part as mastery over machines, a mastery founded on a concept of difference that many readers would later conflate with race.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe presented the handsome and intelligent slave George Harris to challenge racist assumptions of black inferiority and to embody the virtuous work ethic of a free laborer. She illustrated both facets by dramatizing his human skill in manipulating machine technology. Hired out by his master to a bagging factory, George proves his humanity by “invent[ing] a machine for the cleaning of the hemp” and therefore “displayed quite as much mechanical genius as Whitney’s cotton gin.” But George’s “mechanical genius” is precisely what makes him vulnerable in a slave system which prizes slaves not for their ability to wield

¹³ David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 117-18; Louis Chude-Sokei, “The Uncanny History of Minstrels and Machines, 1835-1923,” in Stephen Johnson, ed., *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012): 104-32.

machines but for their condition *as* machines. Jealous of his “intelligent chattel,” his master returns George to the drudgery of farm work, refusing higher compensation in order to prevent a more ominous transgression: slaves should not invent “machine[s] for saving work” because “They are all labor-saving machines themselves, every one of ‘em.” Though Stowe repeatedly insisted that the central violation of slavery was the turning of people into saleable things, she described George not simply as a “man [who] could not become a thing” but more particularly as a man who makes things—indeed a man who makes things (machines) which themselves make things (hemp bags). The essence of George’s humanity is his command over technology, whereas slavery’s inhumanity lay in its capacity to use people as technology. In a supple contrast, Stowe deployed the figure of George as a part of the novel’s larger rhetoric which not only attacks southern slavery but also defends northern freedom. Hardly a pastoral refuge, slavery reduces people to machines; and hardly a dark satanic mill, the factory awakens “mechanical genius” and independent striving of wage-earning laborers, whatever their race. Though Stowe’s book would amount to a full-throated defense of neither Northern industrial capitalism nor black membership to the ranks of American labor, George’s reversal illustrated the proper relations between man and machine which free labor nurtured and slavery corrupted: he stood for the difference between slaves as human machines and machines as mechanized slaves.¹⁴

Stowe’s portrait of George registered a powerful strain of Yankee technological utopianism that soared during the era of slave emancipation. As Yankees contemplated the future of the freedpeople in the nation, they continued to define the future of American technology in relation to the soon-to-be eradicated institution of slavery. Writing in 1863, following Lincoln’s

¹⁴ Indeed, Stowe’s illustration of George’s human rage seems to preserve something machine-like in an image which shifts from a natural fire to a furnace fire: A “volcano of bitter feelings...sent streams of fire through his veins...and his large dark eyes flashed like hot coals”; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly* (1852; New York: Penguin, 1986), 54-56.

delivery of the Emancipation Proclamation, Boston Brahmin (and friend of Emerson) Oliver Wendell Holmes captured the North's patriotic mood by extolling its mechanical genius. While "the melancholy harvest" of Civil War had returned many sons of New England home as amputees, Holmes hailed the American inventor Benjamin Franklin Palmer for repairing American bodies by producing artificial limbs. The result, for Holmes, constituted a reconstruction of the national body into a human-machine hybrid. Referring to the popular walking doll Miss Autoperpatetikos, Palmer's prosthetic limb could do "what no automaton can do"—allow its owner to shift his weight from one leg to another, shortening the other as it swings forward. Out of this innovation Holmes spun a dense web of connections which linked the prosthetic to "our advancing American civilization." The "well-shaped, intelligent, docile limb" was a product of "the same sense of beauty" which gave harmonic form and color to American-made household-utensils and the "whole new system of labor in her machinery for making watches and rifles."¹⁵ The marriage of body and machine was, in this case, also a marriage of industry and art, a progress in civilization that followed from progress in technology. In the flux of Civil War and slave emancipation, Holmes used Palmer's limb to assure readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* of the nation's future and the harmony between the organic and the mechanic it stood for. Indeed, Holmes mapped the meaning of the machine onto the meaning of the war and emancipation. "The foot's fingers are the slaves in the republic of the body. Their black leathern integument is only the mask of their servile condition." While the postwar nation

¹⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Human Wheel, Its Spokes and Felloes," *The Atlantic Monthly* 11.67 (May 1863), 568, 578, 579. Among the first American-made mechanical toys to achieve commercial success, Miss Autoperpatetikos was patented by inventor Enoch Rice Morrison in 1862, who reproduced human motion through a clockwork mechanism which operated the doll's legs independently; King, *Metal Toys and Automata*, 39.

would have freed human slaves, its freedom would be secured by enslaving black-masked machines to the national body.¹⁶

As with other moments of emancipation, Americans confronted a new problem of freedom—and attempted to resolve it with race. Holmes appropriated images of abolished racial servitude to imagine the nation’s corporeal relationship to industrial technology. But while Holmes joined other Yankee thinkers in imagining subordinate technology replacing black slaves, other cultural representations of the youthful American body’s engagement with machines muddied the distinction. In one of the first science fiction novels, for instance, Edward Ellis’s *The Steam-Man from the Prairies* (1868) dramatized the progress of the hump-backed and dwarfed Johnny through the Western frontier, fending off both Indians and bears, propelled by Steam-Man in black face; in Holmes’s terms, not only the handicapped white boy but also the nation’s westward progress was borne on the back of a prosthetic black machine.¹⁷ Despite the emancipation and enfranchisement of enslaved African Americans, race returned in American thinking about technology to define machine subservience.

Whereas Stowe seemed to imagine a future for black freedmen as a master of machines, other Yankees were quick to imagine their own relation to machines as a form of mastery over a subordinated black slave. This tension was rendered not only in popular dime novels but in paintings for the elite middle classes such as those depicted in Eastman Johnson’s *Christmas Time, the Blodgett Family* (1864; fig. 4.3). Painted after Holmes had penned his paean to the nation’s technological progress and as former African American slaves were enlisting in the Union army, Johnson’s painting depicted a prominent Northern family rapt at the dance of the

¹⁶ Holmes, “The Human Wheel,” 572.

¹⁷ Later science fiction novels such as Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *The Master Mind of Mars* (1927) figured the mechanization of the American body with older tropes imperial conquest. Bill Brown, “Science Fiction, the World’s Fair, and the Prosthetics of Empire, 1910-1915,” 130-35.

son's "Dancing Dan." Though made of carved wood and jointed with springs, the toy was sold and recognized in the time as a mechanical toy for the "automatic" motion it produced. Dressed as a Union soldier, this early mechanical toy also encapsulated the ambivalence of liberal Northerners toward the freed slave, here both icon of the Union cause and physical object of racist caricature.¹⁸ But at the same time the painting focuses on the toy's own evident power over the human scene: it compels the family's attention and choreographs the boy's body whose continuous hand energy was needed to animate the "jig." As the family looked to the black minstrel toy to imagine the uncertain place freed slaves would take in the nation's future, so too did they contemplate the place of automation in the domestic parlor.

In their representations of black slave machines, Holmes, Ellis, and Johnson betrayed a disjuncture in Yankee thinking about freedom. Although they hailed abolition as a victory for human progress and the ethos of free labor, they betrayed an anxiety about the intensifying relations between the human body and industrial machinery that would consummate the new birth of freedom. Race returned in these images not simply as representations of black people, but as human masks for the seemingly animate life of mechanical things. They pointed to a more general phenomenon of commodity culture that was emerging alongside the growth of capitalism in the centers of Northern industry, and that Stowe herself registered in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In a novel originally subtitled "The Man Who Was a Thing," Stowe distinguishes the inhuman reification of slavery with the human life that imbues the objects of the free home. While the "difference" between Uncle Tom and a chair is that the "chair cannot feel and the *man* can,"

¹⁸ Eleanor Jones Harvey, *The Civil War and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 207; Suzanne Boettger, "Eastman Johnson's 'Blodgett Family' and Domestic Values during the Civil War Era," *American Art* 6.4 (Autumn 1992), 60-64. As John Davis argues, Eastman Johnson's ambivalence toward slavery and black freedom was shaped by his everyday engagement with urban slavery in Washington, D.C., which Davis demonstrates in a close historicist reading of Johnson's iconic painting *Negro Life in the South (Old Kentucky Home)* (1859); "Eastman Johnson's Negro Life at the South and Urban Slavery in Washington, D.C.," *Art Bulletin* 80.1 (March 1998): 67-92.

chairs, such as the one belonging to Quaker Rachel Halliday, revealed its “life” of “twenty years or more.” Rachel’s “motherly loving kindness” existed as much in the chair as in her person.¹⁹ While the mode of sentimental personification was hardly unusual in nineteenth-century fiction, it was a striking uncertainty in a novel that sought to draw a clear line between things and people as the very line between slavery and freedom. As Mark Seltzer argues, Stowe’s sensuous literary aesthetics depicted relays between persons and things that exceeded the liberal Yankee construct of freedom as the opposite of human commodification.²⁰

As she did with machinery, Stowe marked a difference between good, warm, living things of the Northern home with the specter of human commodification that was central to plantation slavery. Stowe rendered the perversion of human commodification in the figure of Topsy, the novel’s most excessive character. Topsy suddenly appears in the St. Clare household, and in Stowe’s novel, as both a plaything and as a living embodiment of slavery’s mechanical mode of human reproduction. As she explains to her reluctant mistress, the marmish New Englander Miss Ophelia, Topsy was neither born nor made: “Never was born...never had no father nor mother, nor nothin.” Raised like livestock, Topsy insists that “nobody never made me,” which responds to Ophelia’s query about whether she knows her Maker. “I ‘spect I grow’d.” Topsy thus fits into Stowe’s vision of slavery as a product of a system which not only reduces people to “things” like animals and chairs but also severs the bond between mother and child; the difference between having a mother and being motherless is a vital index of humanity in a system which depends on the natal alienation of its living property, a state Orlando Patterson would later define as the “social death” essential to the ideology of slavery as an institution. But in Topsy, Stowe’s portrait of slavery’s inhumanity produces an image of mechanical life. Stowe

¹⁹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 481, 215.

²⁰ See Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines*, 47-49, 74-75, 81.

draws the reader's attention to Topsy's "round shining eyes, glittering as glass beads," "the black, glassy eyes glitter[ing] with a kind of wicked drollery," "eyes twinkling as she spoke." What first appears as "something odd and goblin-like about her appearance," something "heathenish," Stowe further specifies as something machine-like. When her master St. Clare orders Topsy to "give us a song, now, and show us some of your dancing," she obeys like "a dog" but also responds like a machine:

...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 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 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.

Topsy turns on by her operator's volition and turns off "suddenly" by returning to a state of perfect immobility; she produces "odd" sounds which at once signal a natural racial expression and an "unearthly...steam whistle"; she is a "thing struck up," her "cunning glances" revealing not quite a hidden humanity but rather the uncanniness of inhuman automation behind glass eyes.²¹

Stowe meant Topsy's uncanny movements to demonstrate the scandal of slavery; at the end of the novel she projected a future in which Topsy, taken north as Ophelia's ward, will be reformed in the moral environment of freedom. Yet following the novel's wide reception during the age of emancipation, Topsy would take on a life of her own as a racialized figuration of the blurred boundary between nature and technology. What in Stowe's novel was a perfect product of slavery became for popular audiences a perfect emblem for an emerging culture of mechanical reproduction. Indeed Stowe's anti-slavery melodrama—and the figure of Topsy in particular—

²¹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 351-2.

quickly became appropriated by popular commercial culture in the antebellum North, and remained fixtures through the early twentieth century. In addition to Stowe's novel, soon republished and pirated on both sides of the Atlantic, American consumers could buy images of Topsy in a multitude of theatrical and visual representations of contemporary popular culture: they could see Topsy performed on stage at one of the hundreds of "Tom Shows" which toured the nation; illustrated in postcards, showbills, or illustrated reprints of the novel, still a best seller by the turn of the century; and animated in early silent films shown in nickelodeons. Wherever a new technology of mechanical reproduction attempted to enter the mass consumer market, a new adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a new incarnation of Topsy were sure to follow. In 1888, in one mundane instance, a magic-lantern slideshow presentation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made a custom slide for Topsy; the life-like effects of the new form of visual representation was enlivened by the slide's rolling eyes (fig. 4.4).²²

The persistence of the Topsy figure can be explained for its ability to symbolize the animated life of a machine in the guise of a slave. As early as the 1850s, the stage form of Topsy transposed the ambiguity in the slave-machine from the realm of political economy to popular forms of commercial culture. For the novelist Henry James, recalling a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the National Theatre in Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1850s, Topsy marked the difference between artful mimetic representation and crude mechanical reproduction. That

²² Scholars have recently begun to examine the role of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in shaping American culture well after the context of 1850s anti-slavery politics in which it was written; cultural historians have been particularly sensitive to the ways the immense popularity of the novel and its many adaptations in theatre, film, and popular racial iconography provide a prism to American perceptions of race during the rise of mass consumer society, though little sustained focus has been given to its manifestations in material culture. See David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: Norton, 2011); Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Jo-Ann Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985). For a good sample of Topsy dolls and other children's toys and commercial ephemera related to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Stephen Railton, dir., "Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive" (1998-2009; online: <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/tomituds/games.html>; accessed 23 February 2012).

audiences would associate these anxieties with blackness is not surprising; as Kenneth Warren has shown, and as we have seen in chapter three, James himself achieved his “free play” of imagination by excluding African Americans and the social history of freedom and emancipation they represented—a history he associated with the melodrama in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—from his self-consciously artful realist fiction.²³ In James’s scheme, Eva and Topsy were the two “opposed forces” of culture—an opposition between Matthew Arnold’s transcendent Culture and the debased popular culture of Barnum’s American Museum, between the sublime of aesthetic imagination and the shallow amusement of mechanical reproduction. In perceiving this contrast at the Tom show, James received one of his “earliest aesthetic seeds”: the “free play of mind” contrasted with the “crude scenic appeal,” and “the gravity, the tragedy, the drollery, the beauty, [with] the thing itself.” Whereas Eva’s performance stood for the marriage between “resemble[ance] or simulat[ion]” and genuine experience which made up “the thrill of aesthetic adventure,” “Topsy, the slave-girl,” “bec[a]me for Anglo-Saxon millions the type of the absolute in the artless.”²⁴

That the memory was still palpable to James in 1913 hinted at the longevity of Topsy’s symbolic value for a broader public. Less elite cultural observers than James used Topsy to name new type of liminal states of human mechanization and mechanical life that were broached by the ever expanding reach of “artless” industrial production into American life. For merchants, she was an image for sale and a machine which made sales. A trade journal for store window dressers recommended to its readers a mechanical Topsy doll for their Easter displays. “A

²³ Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), chap. 1. See also Sara Blair, *Henry James and the Writing of Race and Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁴ Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others: A Memoir* (1913; Chappaqua, NY: Turtle Point Press, 2001), 85-6; for a brief but complementary reading of James’s experience viewing *Uncle Tom* at the National, see David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: Norton, 2011), 178.

cunning, comical little darkey girl,” the Topsy doll was both cheap to order (\$6.50) and “catchy,” her “[q]uick right and left eye movement, which runs for six hours with each winding,” enticing window shoppers to gaze into the merchandise for sale.²⁵ But as this mechanical Topsy enticed consumers with its eyes and cultivated their wants through the department store window, human Topsies stood behind sales counters as “shop girls” and cashiers. Like other department store managers of the 1870s and 1880s, A. T. Stewart admired his female workforce for being “simply machines working in a system that determines all their actions”—an image which labor leader Samuel Gompers conjured to make an opposite point in his testimony before a Congressional Inquiry about girl workers in department stores. “From sitting quietly,” Gompers explained to the committee, “she must start up from her seat immediately, or from the place where they are kept standing,” in order to deliver cash to the adult “saleslady.”²⁶ Industry managers after the turn of the century resolved these images into a disturbing symbol: “the salesforce [that] grows up like Topsy....neither born nor made.” But the managers’ complaint did not mean to suggest that the salesforce should be encouraged to express their humanity. Worried that the department store system did not do enough to discipline the largely female and often working-class and ethnic sales attendants, modern managers (not unlike Miss Ophelia) attempted to turn their employees into more effective agents of corporate will through intensive supervision and training programs. Shopgirls were not born but they might be “made.”²⁷

²⁵ “Grocery Department: Easter Attractions,” *Harman’s Journal of Window Dressing* (March 1898), 11, n.p., in Afro-Americana series (box 3, folder 5), Warshaw Collection.

²⁶ Effectively, cash boys and cash girls did the job of the cash register, which was patented in 1883 but not in wide use until the 1890s; Brown, *Material Unconscious*, 81. Gompers’ questioner followed by asking whether “that sudden spring is more apt to be a source of injury to the system than the work itself”; *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital, and Testimony Taken by the Committee*, 5 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), 1:285.

²⁷ Stewart quoted in Harry E. Resseguie, “Alexander Turney Stewart and the Development of the Department Store, 1823-1876,” *Business History Review* 39 (Autumn 1965), 314; “Train the Salespeople,” *Dry Goods Economist* 65 (December 3, 1910), 45, both quoted in Susan Porter Benson, “The Cinderella of Occupations: Managing the Work of Department Store Saleswomen, 1900-1940,” *Business History Review* 55.1 (Spring 1981), 6.

By the turn of the century, Topsy had become a symbol of the seeming life animated by a burgeoning consumer society. It named the alluring and lively animation of things in shop windows and the mechanization of labor in the systems that ran the department store itself. Its symbolic power to do so depended not only on its reference to gender—the capacity of the female body for natural human reproduction supposedly under threat in women’s industrial and clerical work—but also on its reference to race. In 1903, the capacity of mass consumer culture to animate objects and systematize life was distilled in the infamous electrocution of “Topsy,” the Coney Island elephant that had trampled its trainer and was condemned to public execution. Filmed and distributed by Thomas Edison—as much to promote the “dangers” of a rival’s scheme for domestic electrification and the thrill of his motion picture machines—*Electrocuting an Elephant* was seen by Americans in nickelodeons nationwide. Moreover, this violent exercise was made not only palpable but attractive, as Jacqueline Goldsby suggests, because it made an oblique but unmistakable reference to black lynching, the widespread anti-black violence, that itself would be animated by the latest technologies of mechanical reproduction, from cinema to wax cylinder sound recordings.²⁸

But as Topsy linked the electrified death of an animal to the dehumanization of African Americans, so was it deployed to provide a sanitized, even pleasing face to the world of machine-made goods, particularly to children. A hit in the American toy market in the 1890s and well into the twentieth century, Topsy rag dolls, along with other dolls of “Negro” girls, capitalized on this trend of toy design and manufacturing. The most popular Topsy rag doll appeared in 1893. Designed by sisters-in-law Celia and Charity Smith of Ithaca, New York, manufactured by a print shop in Massachusetts, and distributed by a toy wholesaler in New York

²⁸ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 225-26.

City, the Smith Topsy rag doll reflected the decentralized and highly competitive environment of a toy industry still in formation. Printed in two pieces in color on cotton sheets for 12 to 20 cents per yard (2 to 8 dolls per yard), consumers were responsible for the final assembly, sewing the pieces together and stuffing them with cotton or hair. But as the popularity of the doll spurred numerous competitors, doll design, printing, assembly, and distribution were consolidated more tightly into single corporations. With increasingly sophisticated manufacturing technology and organization, the dolls entered the market pre-stuffed and with more “natural” designs. Ironically, black dolls like Topsy aspired to more “lifelike” designs as they became more mass produced. In his patent for stuffed doll heads, designer Albert Brüchner described the mechanical process by which the face was printed on an outer fabric layer “in suitable colors in imitation of the colors of a natural face.” In the patent for her black “Alabama Indestructible Dolls,” shown at the St. Louis (1904) and Jamestown (1907) Expositions, designer Ella Smith similarly described the machine process by which the doll’s face would be made to “conform to the contours of a human face.”²⁹ That Topsy could count both as a natural human face and a denaturalized animate thing suggests the dexterity of the slave-machine trope, and the longevity of Topsy’s strange career, which would span children’s toys and books to Hollywood films.

Topsy was both predecessor and foil to Tombo. Tombo, too, constructed a child’s relationship to the world of machine-made goods and “artless” spectacles that mediated the entrance of mass consumer society into American life. Yet Tombo would enter into this history in a different way, and not only because its racist depiction of an “Alabama Coon Jigger” held not even a lingering aura of anti-slavery protest. Shifting the use of the slave-machine from the realm

²⁹ Dorothy S. Coleman, Elizabeth A. Coleman, and Evelyn J. Coleman, *The Collector’s Encyclopedia of Dolls* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1968), 23, 70, 303-5, 562-3, 582-3, 619; Brüchner and Smith quotations on 98, 583-4.

of mass cultural production to mass cultural consumption, Tombo's designers offered children a physical encounter with mechanical life as a form of racial mastery.

II. Black Faces, Machine Ideas

Like a Topsy rag doll or the Blodgett's wooden "negro jig dancer," Tombo put a human face to an emerging machine-made world. But it did so for a very specific sector of this world: the marketplace of mechanical children's toys. This marketplace had been growing steadily since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Automata and other clockwork-driven novelties had been staples of European fairs and traveling puppet shows since the late seventeenth century, both an amusing spectacle and a demonstration of Enlightenment ideals of ordered motion.³⁰ These toys were racialized from the beginning. Since the 1840s, wealthy American consumers would have been familiar with the high-quality, lavishly decorated, and hand-crafted mechanical toys imported from German, French, and English makers, including climbing monkeys and dancing "negroes."³¹ As they entered the marketplace, however, Tombo's predecessors became charged figures in a debate over the value and meaning of machinery and machine-made goods for the equally new cultural realm of childhood. Of course, the commercial world of children was host to many mechanical toys besides black dolls, mechanical or not, and many that distilled different (though complementary) social conflicts over ethnicity, gender, and empire in sanitized playthings, from baby dolls to Cowboy & Indian figurines. At stake for designers and critics of all of these mechanical children's toys, however, was the freedom of a child's mind in the industrial economy of play. Repurposing the symbol of the black slave machine to their own

³⁰ Richard Daniel Atlick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 56-58, 76.

³¹ Indeed, in the 1850s, French-made clockwork toys depicting dancing monkeys and "Negroes" would have been available in small numbers in the United States as a luxury item; luxury automata imported from France and Germany would not reach its "golden age" until the 1870s and 1880s; see Candice King, *Metal Toys and Automata* (London: Quintet, 1989), 30-35.

ends, designers of black mechanical toys responded to anxieties about the mechanization of children by joining ideals of mechanical mastery to the iconography of the old plantation.

Once commercially-traded mechanical toys began to enter regular consumer markets around the 1850s, they aroused interest and suspicion as curiosities, more associated with the deceptions in Barnum's Museum and other "lowbrow" amusements than with traditional culture of literary and visual art. According a writer for *Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine* in 1860, referring to the luxury novelties being produced in Europe, "mechanical curiosities" were the "waste" generated by "men of a mechanical turn." From his perch at the "cheapest magazine in the world," the *Ballou* writer nevertheless implied the superiority of the popular literary culture he represented over the luxury trade in automated chess-players, rope-dancers, and speaking puppets—"toys for grown children."³²

By the turn of the century such complaints about the "waste" of mechanical toys could join powerful antimodernist critiques of modern mechanical reproduction. In 1905, a writer for the *Ladies' Home Journal* was especially wary about mechanical toys as an artificial corrosive to the child's imagination. Instead of "the simple toys which delighted their elders," the mechanical toy held at best a superficial interest: "We look with amazement at the way every external detail has been copied, as it stands with its clever mechanism ready, and all we have to do is wind it up and let it go." But "an end, not a means," at its worst, the mechanical toy threatened to retard the child's development because it was "[c]omplete in itself, it suggests nothing to its little owner and leaves nothing to the imagination."³³ The mechanical toy offered the child not "real play" but fake play. Like other manifestations of the mechanical reproduction, from lithographs to photographs, the mechanical toy stoked not only distrust of artifice but also of automation—of a

³² "Mechanical Curiosities," *Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine* 11.6 (June 1860), 592.

³³ "Giving Children Mechanical Toys," *Ladies' Home Journal* 23.1 (December 1905), 18.

culture unauthorized by tradition and unauthored by people.³⁴ The purchase of a toy became a moment for consumers to reassert traditional values and human agency over the ready-made imitation:

The nervous unrest of our time is showing in our children, and their toy department is one little place where we may put down the brakes. Instead of buying playthings as modern, as elaborate, as finished and as mechanical as possible, let us rather study to find simpler toys—those which will cause the child to use his imagination as well as the toy, for this is real play.³⁵

The unsigned article weighted the child's play with the burden of cultural transformation.

Whereas Holmes imagined vigorous American youth enslaving machines to the proposes of national regeneration, this article imagined mechanical toys disrupting children's development with "nervous unrest." In this reading, the Blodgett boy would not have been enacting his own freedom with the dancing black toy, but would become no different from the toy itself, "as finished and as mechanical."

Yet manufacturers and industry boosters sold mechanical toys using the same terms of imitation and authenticity. Overwhelmingly, they defended their product not only as imitations of natural life but also as authentic demonstrations of mechanical life.³⁶ In magazines catering to consumers of both children's playthings and technological invention, the mechanical toy appeared as an pedagogical tool by which children would learn about the new machine-made reality. In 1867, *Scientific American* promoted investment—among the "less explored fields for fortune"—by highlighting the profitability of uniquely sensuous American designs. While

³⁴ See Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 160-66. For the powerful antimodern impulse in American culture, which took shape in partly reaction to the profusion of mass produced mechanical goods of the emerging consumer society, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981; rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁵ "Giving Children Mechanical Toys," 18.

³⁶ For the competing notions of authenticity in American culture during the age of mechanical reproduction, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

Europeans still dominated the market for many toys, American manufacturers were stirring desire for “new sensation toys,” among them a “returning ball,” a Quaker pop-gun, kaleidoscopes, imitation steam engines, and “the dancing negro.” More than one toy enumerated among others, the steam-propelled “negro jig dancer” was a particularly “Yankee notion.” What made the notion particularly “Yankee” must have been in part its visibly cumbersome contrivance: “A kerosene lamp heats a small brass vessel full of water and shaped like a top. It revolves in its socket and moves a wire which communicates with the figure.”³⁷ But it must also have been related to its synthesis of the mechanical and the artistic, the pedagogical and the amusing. “Our toys are either artistic or mechanical—perhaps both,” the *Scientific American* quoted one toy manufacturer in 1868. “[T]hey simulate life. They are not repulsive exaggerations, nor caricatures, but life like.” For this postbellum toy manufacturer, mechanical toys like the “negro jig dancer” would not simply represent real life but reproduce it; they sated the child’s “taste, this striving after the actual.” And what was “actual” about the mechanical dancer was not only the human life it imitated but its real machinery, the “mechanical movements” which were “a means of instructing children in the principles of mechanicals” and therefore dispelled the fear of machines as “a dreadful agent of evil.”³⁸

In defenses of mechanical toys, black mechanical toys like the Blodgett’s Dancing Dan and contrivances like the Yankee “negro jig dancer” were welcome items in children’s hands for their dual duty as an imitation of black dancing and as enactments of mechanical life. A writer for *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1873 advised Christmas shoppers that “[t]he ingenious mechanical toys for children...are really works of art”—among them a “musical toy [which] represents a harp, on

³⁷ “American Toys, where Made,” *Scientific American* 17.18 (Nov. 2, 1867), 277.

³⁸ “Instruction and Amusement Combined,” *Scientific American* 19.6 (Aug. 5, 1868), 89.

which a most comical negro affects to play.”³⁹ As the “art” of cheap mass-produced toys was clarified as specifically mechanical, so was their “life” figured in the role of the racial other. “Never, at any rate, has there been such a variety of jointed, tumbling toys, of mechanical performers, of toys with roles to play, as it were,” wrote Ada Sterling in *Harper’s Bazaar*. “[N]ot mere isolated things having no relation to everything else,” black toys played a particular role for children by giving a familiar face to the mechanical principles that would stimulate the child’s mental and physical dexterity. In mechanical black dancers, and also in ball-toss games in which a child tossed fake apples into “the life-sized head of a laughing negro boy,” children would find both a representation of human life and the mechanical ideas within the toy itself. “Practically all the new toys,” Sterling continued, “are toys with ideas.”⁴⁰

Mechanical toy manufacturers invited children to discover these mechanical ideas in blackface. During the 1870s and 1880s, New England manufacturers such as Ives & Co. and Jerome B. Secor Co. began to manufacture black mechanical banks *en masse* to exploit their own excess productive capacity, using waste material leftover from producing sewing machine and clocks for growing consumer markets.⁴¹ Here racial imagery superficially replicated the iconography of the minstrel show, and more deeply the work of that iconography in displacing mechanical life onto the figures of black slaves. In mailorder catalogues put out by manufacturers and retailers, black mechanical toys were displayed in ways that conflated racial

³⁹ “Christmas Toys,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 6.1 (Jan. 4, 1873), 3.

⁴⁰ Ada Sterling, “The New Christmas Toys,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 41.12 (Dec. 1907), 1257. In 1885, one of the holiday’s “latest hits” was “the stump orator” which depicted a black man “assumes positions of appeal, entreaty, fierceness, and humor”; in 1902, reporting on a tour of a Lower East Side toy factory, the writer described a “balking mule” toy which depicted a clown struggling with a mule—a scene commonly modeled with a black figure. See “Mechanical Toys,” *Scientific American* 52.2 (Jan 10, 1885), 22; and “The Manufacture of Toys and Dolls,” *Scientific American* 87.23 (Dec 6, 1902), 376.

⁴¹ Candice King, *Metal Toys and Automats* (London: Quintet, 1989), 12-43, 75-76; Louis H. Hertz, *Messrs. Ives of Bridgeport: The Saga of America’s Greatest Toymakers* (Wethersfield, Conn.: Mark Haber & Co., 1950); Hertz, *The Handbook of Old American Toys* (Wethersfield, Conn.: Mark Haber & Co., 1947), 1-3, 26-36; Hertz, “Jerome B. Secor and His Mechanical Toys,” *Antiques* (August 1945). Online: http://www.mechanicalbanks.org/scrapbook/1940s/pages/1945_antiques.htm (accessed 3 January 2012).

and mechanical life. A “Musical Negro in Chair” not only “represents negro in chair, dressed in uniform, playing banjo,” but also “moves hand and head up and down, and beats time with his foot in most natural manner.”⁴² Sambo and Dinah dolls promised “lively ‘cullud people’” dressed in “bright southern costumes of the old plantation style” with movements “so natural that one is inclined to think them endowed with real life”—yet “the secret of their movements can be discovered only by the closest examination.”⁴³ An admixture of realism and mechanism, Jerome B. Secor’s popular set of mechanical cast-iron “Colored Minstrels” promised a display of automatic life:

These are a well-dressed group of four automaton figures, which on being wound up go through a variety of entertaining life-like movements, in imitation of playing the Banjo, Bones, Tambourine, etc., while the old lady fans herself vigorously and smiles approval to all.⁴⁴

These mechanical toys were designed to create a “life-like...imitation” of a fantastic slave plantation using the tropes of the blackface minstrel show at the same time as they appealed to the marvel of the “automaton.” This was the new use for blackface that was exploited by mechanical toy designers: it mechanized race—abstracting the reproducing of human difference into something a machine could do—and it racialized a machine by presenting machine life as something black.

Race was just one way toy designers settled the boundary between the child and mechanical playthings. Not all mechanical toys were black and the black toys did not necessarily receive precedence over others in press coverage and in advertisements. Yet they kept particular company. In a catalogue for Chicago’s Marshall Field & Co. department store in 1892, a

⁴² “Musical Negro in Chair,” Sears Roebuck & Co. Catalogue (1912), in Schroeder, Jr., ed., *The Wonderful World of Toys*, 137.

⁴³ “Sambo and Dinah,” in catalogue for Climax Publishing Co (Chicago, n.d.), n.p., in “Novelties” (box 2, fl. 1), Warshaw Collection.

⁴⁴ “The One and Only Colored Minstrel Troupe,” from Secor trade catalogue (Bridgeport, Conn.: c. 1878-1882), n.p., in “Afro-Americana” (box 2, fl. 29), Warshaw Collection; see Hertz, “Jerome B. Secor.”

mechanical cake walk toy was presented alongside a mechanical monkey, clown, and acrobats; a minstrel named only “Mechanical Dancer” and a black mammy named only “Mechanical Nurse” shared page space with a mechanical bear, mechanical mule clowns, and a mechanical fire engine. In its Christmas catalogue from 1910, F. A. O. Schwartz sold a plethora of mechanical vehicles, Cowboys & Indians, a “Mechanical Pig” and “Stubborn Donkey”—and a “Jolly Jigger” presented as an Irish stereotype.⁴⁵ Among these toys, the value of race becomes clear as a dexterous mark of difference: the boundary between human and machine life found form onto stark categories of the non-human, subhuman, and super-human “other.”

In addition to using race to address children of the white middle classes, the toy industry also used racial imagery to affirm a distinction between consuming machine-made and mechanical goods, and making them. The white child consumer was thus contrasted to his or her ethnic working-class counterpart, whose labor was exploited in many of the toy industry’s factories. In a tour of a mechanical toy factory on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1902, likely owned by the Meier Company, a chipper *Scientific American* reporter described its “half-European, half-American” workforce of “factory girls” in a process of mechanical metamorphoses. While the factory itself was in a state between handicraft and mechanical reproduction (“the most ingenious machinery and the simplest form of hand labor work side-by-side”) so too were the factory girls somewhere between children and the toys they were painting:

From roof to cellar the interior of the New York factory...is a chaos of flaring color. Paint—red paint, green paint, yellow paint, paint of all possible hues—is spread with lavish hand on the tin. The factory girls are besmeared with it; every floor reeks with it.⁴⁶

Though the toy they were painting—a tin “balking mule” with clown—had a clear genealogy in earlier black cast-iron mechanical banks, the article positioned the multiethnic workforce as a

⁴⁵ F. A. O. Schwartz Christmas Catalogue (1910), 6, in “Toys, Models, Hobbies” (box 199, fl. 6), Warshaw Collection.

⁴⁶ “The Manufacture of Toys and Dolls,” *Scientific American* 87.23 (Dec. 6, 1902), 376.

more ambiguous machine-made creation. Resolving into neither black nor white, neither foreign-born nor future Americans, the factory girls were instead decorating themselves into a multi-colored reflection of the toys they were making.

Yet it was this blurred point that mechanical toy designers edged children closer to as more and more entered the marketplace with increasingly sophisticated designs. When Tombo began to be manufactured a decade later—first in Germany, then in New York factories—its cheap, multicolored tin frame established several marks of difference between the toy and the child. Like other animate black toys its “life-like” motion was designed to allow the child to see black dancing without a black body and, at the same time, to see the spectacle of mechanical life without themselves being touched by the machine. In their designs filed with the U.S. Patent Office, mechanical toy designers described this relationship not as a given but as an outcome of a performance between a human operator and a toy whose motion was unpredictable and even violent. In 1889, the New Jersey toy designer William D. Chase designed his black mechanical dancer not to replicate human dancing, black or otherwise, but “to provide a mechanical toy in which the reciprocating motion of the dancer will be made irregular.” In producing a movement that was “not...uniform, but at times will be faster than at other times,” the result would be a spectacle of a “peculiar jarring or violent oscillating motion.” This violent motion itself oscillated inside and outside of human control:

I pivot said legs to the body proper, and connect the feet of the dancer by delicate springs *n* with the body proper....As the figure is now moved, the weights on the feet tend to lower them, while the springs *n* tend to raise them, thereby producing a swinging or oscillating motion of the feet independent of the motion of the body.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ William D. Chase, “Mechanical Toy,” U.S. Patent 400,055 (March 26, 1889), 3, 4. See also E. Eastman, “Mechanical Toy,” U.S. Patent 937780 (Oct 26, 1909); Frank T. Ahern, “Push-Toy Jigger,” U.S. Patent 1,251,458 (Jan. 1, 1918); T. M. Vaughan, “Mechanical Dancing Toy,” U.S. Patent 1,407,451 (Feb. 21, 1922); Ferdinand Strauss and Albert Dingfeld, “Mechanical Toy,” U.S. Patent 1,499,485 (July 1, 1924); Thomas R. Arden, “Mechanical Jigger Toy,” U.S. Patent 1,614,912 (Jan. 18, 1927). Patents accessed online via google.com/patents 13 Feb 2012 and 21 May 2012.

While Chase named his creation a “boy” and illustrated it in the garb of a typical black plantation dancer, he rendered the actual dance in prose that mixed the active volition of the human designer with the passive voice of automation. The schematic itself illustrated how behind the toy’s blackface mask lay a whirl of abstract movement with an ambiguous relationship to the black body (figs. 4.5-6). Was the violent oscillation inflicted on the symbolic racial other? Or was it something done by the black “boy” that had to be disciplined?

As mechanical toys became more sophisticated, toy designers further reconceptualized the toys’ irregular motion (and “ideas”) as an animate object that would test the child’s will. Twenty years after Chase, Kentuckian Walter Hendren patented a technical improvement on mechanical toy design that clarified the performance between toy and child. Hendren did not cite Chase’s design but clearly he responded to the ambiguity in the meaning of the toy’s motion and its relationship to the child. Hence to the wind-up mechanism Hendren attached a lever that the user could use “to regulate the adjustment of the figure toward or away from the platform,” allowing the child to modulate the violent oscillation as he pleased. Hendren described the purpose of this improvement in relation not to the inventor but to its user: as the mechanism would “impart dance-like movements to the figure,” so did the “will of the operator” regulate the movement of the dance (fig. 4.7).⁴⁸ To be sure, his address to the “will” of the child was no doubt meant to attract manufacturers and retailers who saw the success of specialized children’s sections in department stores like Wanamaker’s and Macy’s that catered to the consuming desires of the child. The “toy is extremely simple in construction and may be manufactured at a relatively low cost,” he wrote, speaking to potential investors as much as to the officials at the

⁴⁸ Walter S. Hendren, “Toy,” US Patent 959,009 (filed 4 Feb. 1910, issued 24 May 1910), 2.

US Patent Office. “It is capable of furnishing to a child an unlimited amount of amusement.”⁴⁹

By introducing the will of the child into the toy’s performance, however, Hendren further clarified the value of the black body as an object of subjection. Whether its movement was a “life-life” rendition of a plantation jig or the “violent oscillation” of a machine, it became a dance according to the child’s volition and desire for amusement.

Hendren’s design formed the base of Tombo, and his patent would be listed on its packaging and advertisements throughout its life on the market. Yet the primary design was claimed by German toymaker Ernest Paul Lehmann, the toy’s first manufacturer and whose major “improvement” was less technological than dramaturgical, a tweak in the script of performance. Like the Hendren patent, Lehmann’s described “a human or animal figure” that would be “lifted and lowered by a mechanism contained in a box,” and, like Hendren’s, this one allowed the child to start and stop the dance at will. But Lehmann’s lever allowed child to regulate the speed to a fine gradation, from slightly accelerating or “retard[ing] the speed of motion...up to a full stop at any desired moment of the performance.” “The operator, knowing the rhythm of the dance by heart...causes the figure to perform any dance” he chooses. Rather than simply impose his will on the toy, the toy “requires some skill or knowledge of musical rhythm for its true performance.”⁵⁰ In this Lehmann responded as much to children’s consumer desires as to doubts about the pedagogical value of mechanical toys and their corrosion of “real” play. But he also demonstrated a further transformation of the scripted play with machines; indeed it was a different definition of mastery. The child would confront the violent rhythms of mechanical life not by imposing his will, but by testing his skill. Mastery was something to be learned.

⁴⁹ Hendren, “Toy,” 2.

⁵⁰ Ernst Paul Lehmann, “Toy,” US Patent 1,018,574 (Filed Sept. 19, 1911; Issued Feb. 27, 1912), 2.

Blackface masked the toy and its mechanical life with race; yet the sensation of mastery and freedom would come to the child only through his operation and immersion into the works of the toy. The design of black mechanical toys, and of Tombo above all, thus extracted a marketable value from the slave-machine trope by putting it, and the child, to work. With the coming of World War, the value and purpose of that work would be redirected by an incorporating toy industry toward the formation of a mass cultural economy.

III. War Toys

“I, Ernst Paul Lehmann, subject of the King of Prussia, residing at No. 6 Plauerstrasse, Brandenburg-on-the-Havel, Prussia, Germany, have invented new and useful Improvements in Toys, of which the following is a specification.”⁵¹ This “new and useful” improvement was Tombo, whose design Lehmann had based on a long line of American mechanical toys; but his address to the US Patent Office reflected his appreciation not only of American racial iconography but also of the burgeoning American marketplace. Lehmann was among the manufacturers who were turning the German toy industry—long renowned for its craftsmanship—into the largest in the world, and through toys shaping the formation of a modern consumer society in Germany. For German consumers, American racial iconography was especially appealing for displacing their ambivalence toward Germany’s colonial subjects while compensating them with an authentic racial other safely located in a distant American plantation.⁵² At the same time, Tombo likely appealed to Lehmann because it would appeal to

⁵¹ Lehmann, “Toy,” 2.

⁵² The allure of American racial iconography for German consumers is explained in Bowersox, *Raising Germans in the Age of Empire*, chap. 1; David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). For the French case, and a rich explanation of the symbolic work of displacement and compensation that the French perform with American racial iconography, see

Americans. Germany's exports dominated the US toy market (40% in 1912, 50% by 1915), and Lehmann's mechanical toys were especially popular; American buyers accounted for a third of German sales, a fact that prompted the leaders of the trade to lobby the German government to support a delegation to the San Francisco World's Fair in 1913 so they could outmaneuver their British, French, Japanese, and American competitors.⁵³ To be sure, early packaging for the Alabama Coon Jigger shows that Lehmann had American consumers—or at least the copyright norms of the American market—on his mind: he attached his “Marke Lehmann” and “Bild Geschützt” to both German and American patents (see fig. 4.1).

Soon, thanks to a world war and a canny salesman, Tombo would lose the “Marke” and gain a lofty place in the rising American corporate economy and its system of mass consumption. When Tombo crossed the Atlantic, it contributed to a transformation in the American toy industry a half-century in the making. By shifting the basis from women's domestic skill to men's technological management, from handmade craft to mechanical reproduction, from wood and rags to cast-iron and tin, from family firms to transatlantic networks of distribution, from cutthroat competition on the open market to organized distribution on a national and transnational scale, manufacturers like Lehmann and his growing number of American counterparts began to incorporate the toy economy.⁵⁴ Like other American industries, however, toy makers took advantage of the conditions of world war—and America's belated mobilization for it—to align with the federal state and legitimate both the presence of corporate power in American life and the practices of mass consumption that would sustain that power. Backed by

Auslander and Holt, “Sambo in Paris.” For a detailed examination of the German toy industry and its role in the formation of consumer culture in Wilhelmitic Germany, see Hamlin, *Work and Play*.

⁵³ O'Brien, *The Story of American Toys*, 82; Hamlin, *Work and Play*, 1-2.

⁵⁴ For an excellent and critical interpretation of this transformation, see Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), chap. 2.

the ambitious toy dealer Ferdinand Strauss, Tombo and its racial iconography thrived in this moment of economic change for affirming an American national identity and technological superiority; by 1920 Strauss confidently put Tombo's design of racial mastery to work—not only to introduce children to machines but as a face of a machine-made abundance that corporate industry would provide.

Tombo was a fairly marginal item when Lehmann released it in the early 1910s. Via an importer or importers, likely based in Manhattan, Lehmann would have sold Tombo in bulk along other toys in his line to regional distributors, who then would have sold it by the dozen to agents of small toyshops and perhaps to larger retailers and department stores like Wanamaker's and Marshall Field's. Thus Tombo joined a teeming system of mass distribution, advertising, and sale by which numerous industries—from garments to cars—opened up a new mass market for their wares. Still, much of the toy market still depended on informal and contingent exchanges between middlemen and small retailers. Tombo's appearance on the back pages of *The Billboard* gives a sense of how the toy moved. In Chicago, wholesaler Ed Hahn sold the toy to retailers for \$3.75 per dozen (“‘Live’ Novelties for the Holidays”), and M. Gerber in Philadelphia for \$4.00 per dozen (“Newest Lehman [sic] Mechanical Toy”).⁵⁵ That these sales notices appeared in *Billboard* hint at the transitional nature of the economy in which Tombo was bought and sold. A trade journal of an incorporating music industry, it catered to aspirations for nationwide reach and streamlined production of music, and the small-scale, disorganized jumble of the old amusement industries.⁵⁶ Indeed, that middlemen sold Tombo alongside jewelry, “notions,” and cutlery, corn poppers, collar clips, and Nut-Oyl suggest that mechanical toys still had an alien aura that made them different from other children's playthings.

⁵⁵ *The Billboard* (Nov. 29. 1913), 154; *The Billboard* (Nov. 8, 1913), 62; see also Gerber in *The Billboard* (Dec. 19, 1914), 184.

⁵⁶ For an examination of these shifts through the lens of the music industry, see Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, chap. 1.

Tombo's fortunes changed thanks to one Ferdinand Strauss. A Bavarian immigrant who moved to the New York when he was 18 years old, Strauss got his start in the garment industry before he established an import firm for German mechanical toys around 1900.⁵⁷ The nature of Strauss's relationship with Lehmann has not yet been uncovered. It seems likely that Strauss (or an importer like him) oversaw Tombo's distribution to regional wholesalers across the nation from his Manhattan offices. It is clear that Ferdinand Strauss took ownership of Lehmann's patents and consolidated assembly in the United States as soon as war broke out in Europe. Perhaps Strauss had made an arrangement with his countryman; perhaps he just stole.⁵⁸ In any case Strauss joined dozens of other American toymakers who took advantage of wartime embargoes on German-made goods and struck out an enlarged share of the domestic toy market.

As early as October 1914, Strauss was cited by the *Washington Post* as a beneficiary of the recent rush on American-made goods as German and British imports decreased.⁵⁹ A year later, Tombo was selling out at Wanamaker's Philadelphia flagship department store. While Strauss's success with Tombo depended on a market now free of German competition, it reinforced Strauss's own ambition to expand and consolidate his market share. The story of Strauss's incorporation can be gleaned in the trade journal *Playthings* ("A Business Monthly for Toy Men").⁶⁰ Published since 1903, *Playthings* tracked the toy industry's transformation from laissez-faire competition to an organized sector of the new consumer economy. Here Strauss broadcast his confidence in the face of wartime conditions. In 1917, he officially incorporated his business and raised \$50,000 in capital to expand his operation as a toy manufacture and dealer,

⁵⁷ O'Brien, *The Story of American Toys*, 82.

⁵⁸ Strauss maintained ties with the German toy industry—or at least renewed them after the war—as he coauthored a patent for "Mechanical Toy" with Albert Dingfield in 1924.

⁵⁹ Strauss reported that his business had increased 25% all from "dealers who formerly bought abroad"; *Washington Post* (21 October 1914), 12.

⁶⁰ Ads for Tombo appeared in *Playthings* as early as January 1913, though I have not been able to examine the ad as it had been cut out of the copy I consulted at the New York Public Library. For the original reference see Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, 99n37.

announcing in *Playthings* that all trademarks and patents once controlled by Strauss Manufacturing Company were now “exclusively controlled, manufactured, and sold by Ferdinand Strauss, Inc.”⁶¹ Now running three factories in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Brooklyn, New York, Erie, Pennsylvania, and eventually in New Rutherford, New Jersey, the incorporated Strauss betrayed some difficulties in consolidating material control over the production of his toys during wartime, asking buyers to place orders early “due to the high cost of new raw materials, aside from the uncertainty of future deliveries on the same.”⁶² A month later, however, Strauss assured buyers that he had “full lines” and “*new and regular numbers*” to inject into the supply chain, and crowed about his “enlarged sample rooms” in his Manhattan headquarters near the Flatiron Building. In each case, Strauss backed his promises and dispelled uncertainty to retailers with a full page ad that linked his message of corporate efficiency to the propped-up body of the Alabama Coon Jigger, now shaded in red.⁶³

Tombo was now a corporate brand. With it Strauss joined what Martin Sklar has called the corporate reconstruction of the American economy. More particularly, Strauss took advantage of the favorable political environment created by Woodrow Wilson’s election to the presidency in 1914, and solidified during World War I. In his campaign, Wilson declared a “New Freedom” premised on forming a new corporate liberal order: while the energies harnessed and organized by corporate industrial capitalism would ensure the nation’s prosperity, America’s republican institutions would regulate that economy in such a way that would reflect the public interest and protect individual liberties.⁶⁴ The mobilization for war in 1917 exposed the contradictions in this

⁶¹ Ferdinand Strauss, President, announcement (Jan. 1, 1917), reprinted in *Playthings* (Nov. 1917), 65. See also notice in *Wooden and Willow Ware Trade Review* (April 12, 1917), 603.

⁶² Strauss Mechanical Toys, ad., *Playthings* (Nov. 1917), 66.

⁶³ Ferdinand Strauss, President, open letter (Dec. 22, 1917), reprinted in *Playthings* (Dec. 1917), 67.

⁶⁴ Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 6.

vision. How could a liberal government maintain the ideals of business autonomy and personal freedom while it set out to draft an ethnically and regionally diverse population to field an army, and manage an increasingly distended economy to provide capital, equipment, and food for itself and its allies? To resolve these questions, the Wilson administration organized a Council for National Defense that followed an almost Jeffersonian scheme of republican representation—a national council whose authority was designed to radiate upward from school board to state to nation-state. Although it was meant to allay fears about the centralization of federal power, the Council confronted and adapted to the “complex, variegated character of the American economy” to fulfill its mandate. In practice the Council had to supersede the horizontal political hierarchies of state and region to intervene in vertical lines of production, distribution, and consumption of corporate industries.⁶⁵

The Council of National Defense stood for the new authority of the federal government to regulate business and manage the national economy; it also provided openings for industries to protect their own interests through the apparatus of the state and in the name of the national good. The leaders of the toy industry were especially savvy in appealing to patriotism to extend their control over commercial and labor markets. In 1918, the Toy Manufacturers of the United States successfully lobbied the government to impose tariffs on German-made toys on patriotic grounds, “mindful of the unspeakable outrages upon children perpetrated by the same bloody hands that fashioned these toys.” At the same time, toy makers, many of whom still relied on the work of immigrant women and children, defeated several attempts by workers to unionize; the Liberty Doll Company hired strike breakers and a private police force, while the manufacturers association advised hiring workers of “varied ideas, temperament, racial influences and

⁶⁵ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (1980; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 116-17.

traditions” to prevent the formation of worker solidarity.⁶⁶ In this they followed the example of many industrial manufacturers who used the demands of wartime production to argue for relaxed labor protections—including lifting restrictions on child labor. In exchange, toy makers accepted a certain measure of government involvement in their business. Like the steel and automotive industries, large toy makers diverted the bulk of their productive capacity to manufacturing munitions and arms. But whereas other industries could rely on a measure of state support to fill in for depleted consumer demand, toy makers faced the prospect of a “cancelled Christmas” when the Council sought to divert holiday gift-giving into purchases of Liberty Bonds. The ban would burden toy makers with having to store and withhold from the market stockpiles of already manufactured toys during the year’s busiest shopping season.

The toy industry responded to this threat by linking the value of their product to the nation’s future. Amplifying the rhetoric of turn-of-the-century boosters of mechanical toys and machine-made playthings, the toy men argued to the wartime state that their wares would not only accustom children to mechanical principles but uniquely shape a child’s consciousness for an emerging society mediated by organization, systems, and technology. At a hearing in Washington, D.C. in September 1918, the Toy Manufacturers of the United States challenged the ban in the name of a future technological America. Led by A. C. Gilbert, who invented the Erector Set in 1913, the toy industry made its case by reorienting the relation between children and machines to meet the nation’s war aims. Because toys gave children mastery over machines, a ban on toys would mean a deficit in the nation’s future technological capacity. Moreover, to Gilbert, the toy industry was a social good akin the public schools and the Boy Scouts because toys “exert the sort of influences that go to form the right ideals and solid American character.”

⁶⁶ Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 137-145; both quotations by doll manufacturer leader Joe Amburg and cited on 144, 143.

Toys helped the war effort by training marksmen on “genuine” replicas of guns, and would solidify the nation’s postwar prosperity by envisioning for children their “future occupations” as scientists or engineers. As Gilbert remembered it, the council members, including the secretaries of commerce and the navy, broke from the formal proceedings to play with Gilbert’s exhibits, which included miniature submarines, toy steam engines, and wire puzzles. In any case, Gilbert’s rhetoric was effective and the proposed ban was never enacted. Gilbert duly entered the mythology of the toy industry as “The Man Who Saved Christmas,” though he proclaimed that it was his magical products that proved his point: “The toys did it.”⁶⁷ The Council itself offered more circumspect reasoning: toys would not harm the wartime economy because they were made from “the waste material derived from prior processes of manufacture.”⁶⁸

The TMUS and the NDC were not dissimilar; they each thought about the toy as a part of a grander economy of industry and culture. The war toy, even if it made no overt reference to the war, derived its value from its capacity to divert the excess of industry (waste) and the excess of play (fun) into producing American children. Gilbert’s performance hearkened back to Holmes’s early vision of national renewal executed through servile (and black) technological prosthetics; but Gilbert repurposed his openly autonomous toys (“the toys did it”) as instruments by which children could build the nation—and through which industry could build the child. There would be no waste, economic or cultural. The whole industry seems to have followed Gilbert’s lead. The trade press harmonized this conception of play with the project of postwar renewal and the industry’s profit motive. In the April 1918 issue of *Playthings*, editors published didactic cartoons (Uncle Sam admonishing retailers to “Sell Patriotic Toys For the Fourth of July”) along

⁶⁷ A. C. Gilbert with Marshall McClintock, *The Man Who Lives in Paradise* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1954), 150-57, quotations from “The Man Who Saved Christmas for the Children,” *Boston Post* (25 Oct 1918) on 154, 156. See also Bruce Watson, *The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made* (New York: Viking, 2002), 95-102.

⁶⁸ “Public Asked to Cut Christmas Buying,” *New York Times* (3 Sept. 1918), 11.

with articles by bankers who wanted to “unshackle business” from “Governmental red tape and false standards of conservation,” tying the war effort to economic prosperity and corporate freedom.⁶⁹ To retailers, however, toy makers offered not only assurance about the continued profitability of the children’s market but also advice about how to profit from wartime culture. In a full-page ad, Arden Toys sold a toy machine gun, anti-aircraft gun, and “blow-up fort” to “Young America” infused with the “spirit of ‘18.”⁷⁰ The pitch A. C. Gilbert would deliver to the Council on National Defense had already been tested on toy buyers for whom Gilbert’s line of “realistic” war toys—machine guns, submarines, and “Nurses’ Outfit (for the little girl)”—represented the key to “a profitable summer business” because “Boys and girls everywhere want practical toys with which they can *play war*” (fig. 4.8).⁷¹

The war toy crystallized a new relation among children, industry, and the state. As Elizabeth Wood shows, Gilbert’s performance established the toy industry as a guardian of child welfare by changing the meaning of childhood “emancipation”: the nation-state shifted attention away from enforcing child labor laws while claiming a stake in the commercialization of childhood. Just two years earlier a vibrant campaign of anti-child labor activists blended the moral rhetoric of slave emancipation with Progressive-era ethos of social reform to help spur Congress’s passage of the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act, which outlawed interstate commerce in goods made by children younger than 14. In a series of photographic essays for the *Child Labor Bulletin* in 1912, Lewis Hine gave this campaign visual heft in photographs of white children at work in factories and industrial agriculture; one of his most striking juxtapositions

⁶⁹ “Sell Toys for the Fourth of July,” *Playthings* (April 1918), 103; Charles H. Sabin, “Victory Depends on Industries,” *Playthings* (April 1918), 107.

⁷⁰ *Playthings* (June 1918), 22.

⁷¹ At this point the bulk of Gilbert’s manufacturing plant was diverted to making gas masks, machine guns, and Colt 45s under sub-contract by Winchester, the waste from which was used to make war toys for commercial sale; Gilbert, *The Man Who Lives in Paradise*, 157 (original emphasis).

drove at the moral hypocrisy of the toy industry itself: the dolls that would transform little girls into American mothers and wives were likely produced by working-class women and girls.⁷² But if child labor activists sought to preserve children's freedom in a homelife sequestered from the market, toymakers countered by shifting the grounds of freedom to individual creativity within the relations of the corporate economy. When the Supreme Court ruled the Act an unconstitutional violation of the federal government in the private marketplace, Gilbert's vision raised the toy industry as the moral guardian of childhood development. Instead of the state protecting the child from the marketplace, the magic of the mass-produced toy could be appropriated by the nation-state, as Gilbert argued, in order to enable children to enter the emerging corporate industrial system. Boys that would play as soldiers would become engineers; girls that played as field nurses and mothers could be made into shoppers.⁷³

In addition to consolidating their hold over labor, the toy industry sought to gather consumers into their system. In the war toy, the members of the TMUS renewed the cultural value of their products not only by linking them to the immediate ideological aims of the wartime state but, more broadly, to those of the postwar consumer society. Through playthings the toy industry promised to renew the nation by fostering a child's individual creative freedom while constructing the child as a consumer. If Gilbert's rhetoric echoed the prognostications of Oliver Wendell Holmes in a previous era of postwar renewal, it also foreshadowed in some key respects the modernist ideals of educational toys of the post-World War II era: bright colors, simple shapes, and utilitarian designs were meant to restore the creative energies of the nation's children even as they entered a far more organized system of mass production and

⁷² Marjorie Elizabeth Wood, "Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2011), chap. 4: "Children, Religion, and Capitalism: the Battle for Keating-Owen, the Social Gospel, and the Rise of the American Toy Industry in the World War I Era" (198-266).

⁷³ Wood, "Emancipating the Child Laborer," 259-66.

consumption.⁷⁴ In 1917, however, the contours of that society and the legitimacy of its social relations were still in formation and up for contestation by the state. With Gilbert's Erector Sets and other building toys aids, children would become the engineers and scientists that would lead the future nation to ever greater feats of technological innovation and material abundance. Yet the vision of creative freedom and social power figured in the engineer betrayed the more mundane purpose of Gilbert's discourse: to legitimate not only the toy industry in the lives of children but also mass consumption as a way of life. Although Tinker Toy's "A Thousand Thoughts in One Box" advertised the boundlessness of magical thinking and creative possibility, on the page they yielded nothing more fantastic than a washing machine (fig. 4.9).⁷⁵

On the surface, Tombo's mass appeal during WWI would seem to have less to do with a washing machine than with the racial politics of the wartime nation. Like his erstwhile client Lehmann, Strauss traded on the Americanness of his updated "negro jig dancer." This was no small matter in a wartime culture defined by import bans, sedition laws, and paranoia about the loyalty of immigrants—along with white workers' fears of job competition from growing numbers of Southern black urban migrants. Such tensions played out tensely in the courts and violently in the streets. The toy market also felt their impact. Many manufacturers and retailers adopted the jingoistic slogan "100 percent American" to describe both the origins of their toys and the identity of the children who would play with them. German-born toy makers and retailers were especially sensitive to this language. While F. A. O. Schwarz faced consumer boycotts, one German-born toy maker promised to the *New York Times* that he was "as good an American as

⁷⁴ See Amy Ogata, "Creative Playthings: Educational Toys and Postwar American Culture," *Winterthur Portfolio* 39.2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2004): 129-56.

⁷⁵ For all its promises of infinite possibility, there is indeed something utilitarian if not puritanical about the Tinker Toy. One ad balanced the infinite powers of "the young and mature" imagination that could make "infinite combinations and possibilities" out of the Tinker Toy, while assuring its foundation in "exact mathematical principals" and "smooth hardwood rods and spools, without paint and varnish." *Playthings* (June 1918), 20.

anybody,” and promised to invest his profits entirely in Liberty Bonds.⁷⁶ Toy makers repurposed familiar doll and toy designs in patriotic garb, such as E. I. Horsman’s Uncle Sam’s Kids, all of whom were white. Such a racialized national mascots aligned with the racial policies of the Wilson administration that entrenched Jim Crow segregation in the armed forces and civil services, tacitly endorsed jingoistic campaigns against German Americans, and targeted sedition laws against foreign-born “anarchists.” Against these pressures, “100 percent American toys” followed a time-honored strategy by which European immigrants could made themselves American by making themselves white.⁷⁷ Of course, the Bavarian Strauss not only survived calls for 100% Americanism, but thrived in it. Perhaps Tombo established Strauss’s own patriotic bona-fides as an American industrialist by displacing anti-German xenophobia onto a crude appeal to racial nostalgia. In fact, by 1918 Strauss was spending more on full page ads in *Playthings* right alongside Tinker Toys and Gilbert’s war toys, and even dressed his blackfaced brand in red, white, and blue (fig. 4.10).

But in advertisements to consumers, Strauss defined the racial allure of his product through its machinery. In mailorder and department store catalogues throughout the 1910s, Strauss and his retailers presented the Alabama Coon Jigger at once as a reanimated slave and a piece of technology. A stereotypical “coon” and a “realistic dancing Negro,” the Alabama Coon Jigger replicated “the movements of a Southern plantation dance.” Yet these same advertisements were quick to disclose Tombo’s mechanical origins. Indeed Tombo would not merely imitate but surpass human dancing. According to its advertisements, the wind-up mechanism would entrance children with an “endless variety of ‘steps’” which “far excels the

⁷⁶ Formanek-Brunel, *Made to Play House*, 144-45; quotation on 144.

⁷⁷ Roedigger, *Wages of Whiteness*; Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 122; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

best efforts of the most expert professional dancers.” For all their attention to the toy’s “lifelike” appearance and “natural colors,” advertisements assured buyers that they would be firmly in control of this life. “You only have to wind up the very powerful spring mechanism and the coon will ‘shake his legs’ in the most amazing way,” one mail order catalogue promised in 1912. “The most perfect time is preserved, and by adjusting the regulation device, the Coon can be made to dance fast or slow.” The toy was a representation of an original, natural, lifelike “coon”; it was also a regulated, responsive, and adjustable machine. It was an antebellum “darkie”; it was the “Champion Dancer of the World.” It looked back to the “Southern plantation”; it looked forward to a future where technology would “excel” even the best human limits.⁷⁸

Strauss translated the design of racial mastery inscribed in the black mechanical toy into Gilbert’s wartime economy of play; he fixed the meaning of the trope of the slave-machine within an ideology of corporate capitalism. As advertisements demonstrated how the excess generated from play with the black toy would be converted into mechanical learning, so did they draw the addressed child consumer into a world of machines—and into a relationship with the corporate system that made, distributed, and sold them (fig. 4.11). The racial value of the “Southern plantation” jig would only come into being by engaging with the machine: “Simply release the lever and the ‘Coon’ starts an old-fashioned plantation breakdown.” Indeed this play was a conduit to deeper immersion in technological modernity. From Tombo’s “unique set of works”—“concealed” beneath the “richly decorated platform”—the advertisement connected the toy to a toy car: after playing with Tombo you might be ready for the thrills of the Trikauto. The embodiment of slave and machine in Tombo, and the juxtaposition of a dancing “Coon” to a toy

⁷⁸ “The Alabama Coon Jigger: the Champion Dancer of the World,” advertisement in Johnson Smith & Co. Catalogue (Chicago, n.d.), 9, in “Puzzles” (box 1), Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, Archive Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution; “Alabama Coon Jigger,” advertisement in Sears Roebuck & Co. Catalogue (1912), reprinted in Joseph J. Schroeder, Jr., ed., *The Wonderful World of Toys, Games & Dolls, 1860-1930* (Northfield, Ill.: Digest Books, 1971), 141.

car, lent an alluring historical cast to the notion of childhood emancipation proffered by Gilbert and the TMUS. Strauss positioned Tombo as a conduit between to mythical eras of American history, the pastoral plantation past and a utopian technological future; in the form of a black mechanical toy he presented a literal slave machine, play with which would grounded a child's freedom on a sensation of mechanical mastery. It was a mastery—Strauss was not immodest to remind—that you purchased under the imprimatur of Strauss Mechanical Toys Incorporated.

Whether Strauss was fully cognizant of the meanings his product cast off, he was certainly confident enough to stake his own future on it. With Tombo, Strauss attempted to translate his own American dream into a reality. Strauss had begun his career as an importer of “novelties” and now boldly proclaimed himself “The Largest Mechanical Toy Manufacture in the United States”; whereas he once brought foreign toys inside the United States he now looked outward as “The Biggest Selling Mechanical Toys in the World.” As Tombo was no longer an alien machine but an American toy with global pretensions, so too did Strauss seek to confirm his imperial notions in the geography of Manhattan by opening storefronts in the borough's four train terminals and moving his flagship toy store uptown from the Flatiron district to a spacious storefront on 57th and Sixth Avenue. Strauss himself lived comfortably with his wife and daughter in suburban Yonkers.⁷⁹ It is easy to imagine what Strauss had imagined: an audience of millions of commuters and pedestrians pausing from their bustle to watch his Tombo's, wound up and dancing away.

⁷⁹ “Commercial Leases: Two \$400,000 Deals for Commercial Space Closed,” *New York Times* (Oct. 12, 1920), 32. Between 1900 and 1915 the Strauss household had moved from East Orange, New Jersey (where he named himself as an “importer (novelties)” to 36 St. Andrews Pl., Yonkers. He declared his birth year at 1872 (1900), 1868 (1915) and 1866 (1920) and immigrated in 1886 (1900, 1915) and 1884 (1920). See Twelfth Census of the United States 1900 (roll 968, page 13B); New York State Census 1915, Yonkers Ward 04, page 21; Fourteenth US Census 1920 (NARA microfilm publication T625, roll 1028), Yonkers Ward 4, Westchester, New York, image 288. Accessed via Ancestry.com.

One year after he splurged on his new acquisitions, however, Strauss was bankrupt and his stocks, stores, and products were auctioned off, among them the patents for Tombo.⁸⁰ Strauss's rapid rise and fall suggests the limits of the corporate economy to deliver his own aspirations for abundance, let alone provide for the nation. Yet it also suggests the contingency of Tombo's cultural value, even the instability of its cultural work. What happened when Tombo left Strauss's store for the hands of a parent and child? How did they translate its play into value and use?

IV. Race and the Mechanics of Cultural Transformation

At first glance, Tombo fit right into the postwar vision of consumer abundance. Take, for example, a stock Christmas photo commissioned by the Byron Company around 1920 (fig. 4.12). Here, underneath a decorated tree and patriotic bunting, movie actress Peggy O'Neil portrayed a symbolic mother who beckoned the viewer to a bountiful offering of baby dolls, animals, train cars—and Tombo, right at her left knee. This was the world of abundance and fun that the toy industry had promised to the wartime nation; and it was a world that awaited the entrance of white girls to mother the baby dolls and white boys to take command of the train sets and caricatured racial servants. Although Tombo hardly stole the camera's attention, its placement among its fellow playthings bespoke the ease with which the corporate powers of the new consumer's republic would adapt and transform the ideologies of race and gender to their own purposes.⁸¹ Yet it also betrayed the difficulty in making this vision come to life. Absent from the

⁸⁰ "Bankruptcy Sales," *New York Times* (Nov. 2, 1921), 36. Strauss also owned stock in the Talking Doll and Novelty Co., the Continental Credit Corporation, and the Strauss Toy Shop, Inc.

⁸¹ As historians of race in consumer culture remind us, even the stark racist exclusion projected by Jim Crow signage betrayed the racial fluidity of commercial space. The development of a consumer's republic was shaped by this tension between the accommodation of consumer capital to local orders of race and gender and its effort to incorporate consumers into its markets despite those orders; African American consumers exploited this tension by using their purchasing power to seek equity and free movement within consumer spaces. See Elizabeth Abel, *Signs*

photograph was the child whose own act of consumption would animate the transformative values held in the toys themselves, and yet who would also be incorporated into the wider systems and powers those toys represented. Would the child take his place among the stilled objects and actor? Or would the mutual motion of toys and boy disrupt the order of the scene? While such problems would soon come to the attention of artists—and cartoonists—it was first the subject of psychological inquiry for G. Stanley Hall, who would conceive of the phenomenology of racial-mechanical play as a transformative event in the history of American progress.

The appearance of the child into the scene of play is conspicuously absent from Tombo's archive—barring the discovery of a diary or memoir that might bear witness to a child's play with the toy. As a material object, however, the toy holds clues to how it might have interacted with its user. In addition to providing information about the materials and process of its production, the decoration and form of a material object gave palpable shape to the figments of ideologies and gave them place in everyday life; indeed attention to the design and wear can yield additional information about how people reproduced, resisted, or transformed ideological systems through the use, care, and discard of things.⁸² Nevertheless scholars of racist toys have tended to reduce their meaning to the semiotic—vessels that reflected the intentions of a given ideology if not individual manufacturers or designers. According to Robin Bernstein, for instance, racist toys worked to enlist children in the ideology of white supremacy: children could confirm their own whiteness through play with a slavish black object, and provide an “alibi” for

of the Times: the Visual Politics of Jim Crow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lizabeth Cohen, *Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1998).
⁸² Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *AHR* 110.4 (October 2005): 1015-45; Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 1-22; Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17.1 (Spring 1982): 1-19.

white violence against black bodies that were supposedly insensate to pain. Certainly, such scripts were reinforced and formalized in children's literature that was replete with moments when white girls and boys maim, murder, burn, dissect, whip, and "auction" their black dolls. Although Bernstein's formulation of "dances with things" seeks to encompass the fullness of interaction with a material object, her analysis can only go so far as to suggest that white children were acting on these prompts—drawn especially from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—without explaining why these fantasies of racial mastery and spectacles of racial violence were reappearing in the playrooms of the middle-class white child at the turn of the century. If Tombo and toys like it were representing a "symbolic slavery" within the popular culture of childhood, their material and mechanical raises further questions about their potential to interfere with and recast familiar "scripts" of black and white, person and thing, subject and object.⁸³ By design and by advertisement, Tombo likewise meant to encourage a white child's sense of mastery over a black thing. Yet the uncanny agency of mechanical toys confronted observers' of child's play (if not children themselves) with a new problem of freedom.

Unlike a doll, Tombo moved back. And in the contingencies of play, Tombo's movement did not always go as it was scripted in Hendren and Lehmann's designs or by Strauss's sales pitch. Present-day collectors and auction houses have posted about a dozen videos to YouTube demonstrating the toy's operation in both the Lehmann and Strauss models, which differ only by the regulative lever.⁸⁴ Of course, most of these videos are meant to entice collectors of "Black

⁸³ Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 201-26; Steven C. Dubin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," *Social Problems* 34.2 (Apr. 1987): 122-40.

⁸⁴ The clearest recording is "Lehmann EPL 685 "Oh My" Alabama Jigger 1912" (Jan 5, 2013; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kqpydJIB4g>). Many recordings come and go but most recently I have relied on "ANTIQUÉ 1910 MARX DAPPER DAN COON JIGGER TIN WIND UP TOY & BOX" (May 19, 2013; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krSQ156GzaQ>); "1912 ALABAMA COON JIGGER ANTIQUÉ TIN WIND-UP TOY IN ACTION" (July 16, 2010; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysu1wIidGhE>); "Lehmann 1912 Alabama Coon Jigger Wind Up Tin Toy" (March 15, 2010; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrA6C5ij5Cg>); "1910 Strauss

Americana” to buy the toy at auction, and they present the toy as a nostalgic spectacle of a bygone era of wind-up toy design, if not a bygone era of racism. Nevertheless, together they suggest not just how the toy might have been displayed in Strauss’s department store window, but also how the child might have played with the thing, from the human energy put into winding it up to the whirring machine movement that came out. Especially striking are the few videos that show the cumbersome handiwork needed to wind-up the device. Seeing past the lethargic motion of a nearly hundred-year-old toy far past its prime, it is not hard to imagine that the toy might not have come to life as effortlessly as advertised.⁸⁵ If the toy’s designers and manufacturer promised the child an experience of control, the toy enhanced this experience by taking on the role of a machine out of control. Even if it did work as designed, and even if the child were to impose her own rhythm on the dance, the toy itself worked back with its shuffling feet, swinging arms, and hopping body with sudden twists and turns. In one of the videos the dancer holds a razor. Although it was in keeping with the “coon” stereotype, it was likely a homemade embellishment absent from Hendren’s and Lehmann’s patents and other surviving models. It amplified the tension that the toy was designed to enliven and contain: the operator tested his sense of mastery and skill against an unpredictable mechanical motion.

As we have seen, Tombo’s designers had eagerly adopted the script of racial mastery to model how children would play with the dancing mechanism. Yet in the space of play, even inanimate racialized toys could resist their roles as pliant objects of a child’s will for the very reason they could to be advertised to perform that role: they appeared to have a kind of life of their own. While a lifelike face encouraged children to see their black dolls as stand-ins for black

Tin Wind Up Alabama Coon Jigger” (Dec. 28, 2008; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAP8LEkiA2o>). All last accessed 2 February 2014.

⁸⁵ “Vintage Alabama Coon Jigger - Mid-Ohio Trading Company - 1920’s – Rare” (March 22, 2013; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deHE4K3xudA>); “Antique Strauss Tombo Alabama Coon Jigger Wind-up Toy” (Jan 7, 2008; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnSQUGe91WQ>).

people, they also were also meant for children to engage with, and master, an artificial and seemingly autonomous life of a mass-produced commodity. Here the memory of slavery scripted by the toy blurred into an equally powerful script that meant to introduce children into social relations with things. Indeed, as Bill Brown argues, the preponderance of blackface on mechanical dolls and toys (he focuses on mechanical banks) can be explained as a displacement of an uncanny remainder in American cultural history: slavery's "ontological scandal"—the economic and legal reification of people—returns uncomfortably in consumer capitalism, in which social relations among people are reified as commodities, and commodities are fetishized as living things.⁸⁶ In the field of contemporary adolescent psychology, however, this remainder was perceived as a stage to be overcome on the path of childhood—and racial—development.

In a survey of children's doll play in 1897, the day's preeminent child psychologist G. Stanley Hall recorded several instances when children destroyed their black dolls but failed to exorcise their uncanny life. At least one girl burnt her black doll because she "feared" it, and she stayed away from the fireplace to avoid its "ghost."⁸⁷ The girl's fear of her black doll's ghost was worth Hall's notice. As he pursued his study of adolescent psychology through the turn of the century, he would record with alarm similar moments when white children failed to engage with inanimate things or racial others: they were interruptions in his vision of childhood development. To Hall, as for many subsequent scholars and critics, toys were propositions about modernity: they meant not only to model an adult world for children but to make that world appear as the natural order of things. The mythic function of toys thus meant to coordinate a child's individual development with modern society's conception of its place in history. For the writers in *Ladies Home Journal* and progressive critics of children's labor, machine-made, mass-produced toys

⁸⁶ Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," 197.

⁸⁷ G. Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis, *A Study of Dolls* (New York: E. L. Kellogg, 1897), 30, 34. Bernstein cites this example but not the sense of fear and haunting that followed.

gave proof to the modern moment as a lapse in human progress for supplanting the child's free play with the rational systems of commodity capitalism. However, for toy makers and their boosters—from *Scientific American* to the department store—the modern toy provided the child with an instrument to extend his or her powers through commodity capital, and manipulate the machine-made world as a creator. Hall compassed and attempted to reconcile these two positions. Alarmed at the loss of vital instinct to “over-civilization,” but also a believer in the progressive potential of technology, Hall went a step further from contemporary critics and boosters of toys to theorize play with toys—especially mechanical toys—as a dynamic site for cultural transformation. Race would be the conceptual glue that Hall used to hold this dynamic together. Yet animating his conception of development was a nightmare version of modernity—not unlike the ghost of the black doll—in which the white child would be supplicant to black people and to machines.

Although Hall did not observe a child play with a black mechanical toy, let alone a Tombo at the height of its popularity, his psychology went the furthest in formalizing familiar scripts of racial mastery into an ideology of modernity—and registered most deeply the challenge it posed to conceptions of progress and freedom. Indeed, to understand Hall's conception of historical development means to understand the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, whose texts theorized the nature of historical progress and remained touchstones—or foils—for American scholars at the turn of the century. In his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel imagined the origin of the history of human consciousness as an elemental encounter between a master and a slave. For Hegel, this encounter initiated a transformative dialectic that unfolded over time. The master-slave relationship was not a permanent domination; it contained an explosive tension out of which originated all of human progress. Although the master had

dominated the slave and spared his life in a primal test of will, his power did not translate into freedom. Instead his engagement with the world was always mediated by the subordinated other: he consumed the fruits of his slave's labor without himself knowing how to transform the world. Yet the slave could achieve a true freedom. In serving his master, the slave "trans-forms things and trans-forms himself at the same time," and so could imagine and seize an authentic freedom beyond the master's power. For Hegel, the insurgent slave was the true beginning for human consciousness and history. The unfixity of the slave's consciousness, its "movement, pure Being-for-itself"—one could say, its animation—made history where the master's dependence on his slave arrested his own attempts to change the world.⁸⁸

As a graduate student in the 1870s Hall had read Hegel diligently, but he was no Hegelian. By the turn of the century, he had disowned his graduate study in German phenomenology for the modernist ethos animating the American social sciences: he sought to submit the study of mind to the empirical rigors of laboratory psychology. What bothered Hall was Hegel's presumption of a physical space in which the becoming subject was supposed to "move." "If we are asked to explain light, heat, electricity, chemical change,...[and] the mode in which mind acts on matter," Hall asked of Hegelians in 1878, "or even the way in which the idea of a line, a surface, or a sphere...arises in the mind, we can only reply in terms of movement in time."⁸⁹ Hall constructed his own program of psychological study from the opposite vantage by examining the consciousness of children and adolescents as they "moved" in their material

⁸⁸ Hegel in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Raymond Queneau, ed. (1947), Allan Bloom, ed., and James H. Nichols, Jr., trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 21-22.

⁸⁹ G. Stanley Hall, "Notes on Hegel and His Critics," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 12.1 (Jan. 1878), 100. While Hegel himself expressed a vital "wholesome stimulant of every motive of philosophical culture," Hall declared in 1878, his philosophy itself was "as fatal as a finality" (103). For Hall, Hegelianism, and the social sciences, see Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 55-56; Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

environments. At stake for him was the development of a “race consciousness,” and he was especially interested in how that consciousness was formed when children applied their minds to a material environment defined increasingly by electricity, chemicals, abstract geometry, and machines.

Hall could not completely exorcise the ghost of Hegel. They broadly shared a conception of modernity premised on the historical accomplishment of Western civilization and the exclusion of Africa outside of history; for his part, Hegel drew on his master-slave dialectic to claim that “Negroes” could only enter the historical frame through their enslavement by Europeans. Yet for Hall, the position of the white race at the vanguard of historical progress was being made precarious by the very success of that progress. Indeed Hegel returned in Hall’s rhetoric of struggle, mastery, and historical transformation. In a study of children’s “curiosity and interest” published in 1903 (with Theodate L. Smith), Hall argued that American children had more difficulty mastering the “life” in a mechanical toy than in dolls. Because young children “are apt to attribute life to things which have motion,” and then attribute “causal agencies” to moving things, mechanical toys provoked in the child a psychological “struggle between this timidity, in the presence of the mysterious and unknown, and curiosity in regard to the moving object.”⁹⁰ Thus, as gifts for children, mechanical toys were often a “failure” and “proved either a source of fear or failed to excite a special interest”; even for older children, mechanical toys “soon lose their attractiveness” because they were “too complicated in construction or too delicate to bear investigation” without breaking.⁹¹ Though Hall was voicing many of the same judgments as contemporary critics of mechanical toys, he went further to identify in the child’s interaction with the “life” of the mechanical toy as an event in the child’s development. Writing a

⁹⁰ Theodate L. Smith and G. Stanley Hall, “Curiosity and Interest,” in Hall, ed., *Aspects of Child Life and Education* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1921), 110; reprinted from *Pedagogical Seminary* 10 (September 1903): 315-358.

⁹¹ Smith and Hall, “Curiosity and Interest,” 111.

decade before Tinker Toys and Erector Sets hit the market, the psychologists called for “toys so constructed as to show principles of motion and elementary physical laws, without involving their own destruction.” But until then the psychologists found the child’s destructive impulse salutary for its origin in a “constructive” curiosity. As one boy reported, the reason why he “broke a mechanical toy” was “to find out what made it go.”⁹²

Black mechanical toys like Tombo thus added an extra element to the violent scripts of black doll play. Both a black doll and a mechanical toy, Tombo invited the child to a complex dance in which the destructive impulse to return the black thing to slavery was in tension with the creative impulse to learn the nature of mechanical life. This tension added a twist to what Gail Bederman has identified as the paradox inherent in Hall’s racial pedagogy: the white race owed its supremacy in civilization to its “primitive” instinct to destroy inferior races, yet to further civilization meant to restrain that very primitive impulse in oneself and uplift racial inferiors.⁹³ As Hall argued strenuously and publicly, the problem facing modern white American children lay in cultivating primitive instincts to overcome the passivity of “over-civilization” and thus reinvigorate the progress of the white race. Such a paradox inflected contemporary programs for childhood development such as the Boy Scouts, whose adult leaders Ernest Thompson Seton and Dan Beard warred over whether white boys would be better prepared for modern civilization by performing the identities of the primitive “Indian” or the “pioneers” who annihilated them.⁹⁴ As tools of civilization, machines were different objects of fascination than the primitive, yet they posed similar challenges to the child’s identity. In his masterwork *Adolescence* (1904), Hall described white boys as “walking interrogation-point[s] about ether,

⁹² Smith and Hall, “Curiosity and Interest,” 130, 131.

⁹³ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 110-14.

⁹⁴ Deloria, *Playing Indian*, chap. 4; for Hall’s influence on Seton, 106-8.

atoms, X-rays, nature of electricity, motors of many kinds,” and their minds were open to “the great triumphs of engineering skill, civil, mining, mechanical, inventions in their embryo stage, processes, aerial navigation, power developed from waves, vortexes, molecules, atoms.” Rather than have children passively accept these principles, Hall suggested boys achieve a “healthful assimilation” with them by recapitulating their discovery through play. He pointed to German “toy museums” as a space where boys could engage with “*masterpieces of mechanical simplification and cheapness* illustrating fundamental principles.” Through this play children reproduced “nature’s way” of civilization: “we never short-circuit it without violence.”⁹⁵

The violent destruction of black dolls and mechanical toys were both ambivalent events in Hall’s conception of childhood development: one an uncivilized primitive impulse that nevertheless demonstrated racial vitality, the other a creative impulse that short-circuited racial development. With the right balance of healthful assimilation in primitive impulses and mechanical principle, white American youth would lead the way as “bearers of the world-consciousness” and uplifters of “adolescent” races. But Hall’s vision of technological “millennium” quickly devolved into a placid nightmare of over-civilization:

As we travel around the world, everywhere we shall have steam and electricity; modernized costume and custom; . . . the individuality of races slowly fading; their ideas growing pale in a common menstruum; possibly war eliminated by the parliament of man in a world federation.

The march of civilization would erase racial difference and thus ease racial conflict. Yet without the energies of racial tension, Hall argued, American civilization would lose its identity and devolve into a “factitious and artificial” society, a “barbarism with electric lights.”⁹⁶ Here Hall’s paradox returned, for without a healthful assimilation in steam and electricity the white race

⁹⁵ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1904-5), 1: 156-57 (original emphasis).

⁹⁶ Hall, *Adolescence*, 2:717-18.

would be outpaced by its former “subjects.” Noting the immense gains made by African Americans in industrial training schools such as Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, Hall projected a doubled-edged future at once sympathetic to African American reformers and purposefully provocative to his white readers. Whereas the slave had led a “somewhat animal life” and the freedman one of “mental inferiority,” the rising generation of Southern African Americans was the regional vanguard “along industrial lines.” The “poor whites” left behind, Hall prophesized, “will be led to desperate efforts to assert the superiority of their color.”⁹⁷

Hall’s apocalyptic imagining corresponded to the most radical implication of Hegel’s phenomenology for the interpretation of American history and the history of the Western modernity itself. Despite excluding “Negroes” from the stage of world history, Hegel was likely inspired by the Haitian revolution that overthrew the French regime of colonial slavery, in which slave-born Toussaint L’Ouverture faced Napoleon Bonaparte at the crucible of the modern age. Scholars of slavery have turned to Hegel’s phenomenology to conceptualize the violent dynamism at the heart of seemingly stable slave societies, explain the intellectual and psychological work needed to align systems of human bondage to aspirations for human progress, and illuminate the intertwinement of the social relations of slavery with the emergence of modernity: for slave societies were haunted by the idea that it was the emancipation of the enslaved themselves beyond which the prospect for true freedom lies.⁹⁸ Yet the subsequent imprisonment of L’Ouverture and international castigation of the Haitian republic—indeed the “unthinkability” of the revolution itself in Western historical memory—demonstrates how much

⁹⁷ Hall, *Adolescence*, 2:676-77.

⁹⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). For one of the most generous and penetrating readings of Hegel’s master-slave allegory as a social text, see David Brion Davis’s speculative coda, “Touissant L’Ouverture and the Phenomenology of Mind,” in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 557-64. See also Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 20-21; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 2; Page Dubois, *Slaves and Other Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 10.

the vision of historical progress theorized by Hegel depended on racism to lend it conceptual order and material sustenance. As Paul Gilroy argues, Hegel is most useful in illuminating “the arts of darkness...at the point where modernity is...actively associated with the forms of terror legitimated by reference to the idea of ‘race.’” With the dark arts of race, the believers of progress can imagine themselves at the vanguard of universal emancipation even as the material conditions of their progress—the mass production and consumption of commodities—depends on the exploitation of an “other” category of human beings.⁹⁹

Of the dark arts of Western modernity Tombo can be counted among the more ridiculous. It was the cultural farce that repeated the social tragedy: with Tombo white children could rehearse their own emancipation with technology while reversing the emancipation of African Americans. Nevertheless it disseminated its pedagogy of race and technology widely. As its designers, manufacturers, and advertisers would have it, play with the dancing black slave would produce not only the pleasures of white supremacy but also an education in a rudimentary mechanical system. It might have delighted even Hall for substituting a toy for actual African Americans and actual machines as targets for white children’s vital if destructive impulses; indeed it could resolve the disorder presented by black emancipation and emancipating systems into a ludic choreography of progress, the white child leading its racial and mechanical subordinates into the future. Yet play with Tombo could also conjure a figure that twinned Hall’s dual nightmares. What would it mean for the child to fail to control the toy’s movement—for the machine to master the child, for the child to be overcome by his slave?

⁹⁹ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 57.

V. Welcome the Black Automaton

Tombo was just one among many “dances of the machine” designed in this moment—from the *ballet mécanique* to the Ford assembly line—through which Americans would attempt to orient their bodies and their minds to a future in mass culture.¹⁰⁰ And Tombo was not the only one that figured this mechanical dance in the guise of an African American performer. Although they responded to the same ideological impasse of race and civilization identified by Hall, these dances demonstrated the different ways that white Americans tied dreams of modern liberation to an engagement with a racial other, whether resolving into a violent domination or immersive transformation. In figures of mechanized black bodies—from boxers to jazz musicians—different audiences proposed a range of racial subjectivities to capture a feeling of freedom in a rapidly modernizing world, while suspending the status of their black interlocutors out of the imagined course of progress. What Tombo figured as a mythical plantation slave was elsewhere named as a futuristic black automaton.

Toy manufacturers such as Ferdinand Strauss and psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall found use in the figure of black slave machines to respond to a broader and interlocking set of socioeconomic changes. Often described as Fordism, after the American automobile tycoon Henry Ford, who innovated and articulated many of its features and aims, this regime proposed mass production and consumption as a way of life that would sustain Americans materially and spiritually into the future. In order to ensure both worker compliance and consumer demand for that cars produced by his assembly line, for instance, Ford instituted a five-dollar, eight-hour day that would seem to ameliorate the need for labor unions and transform workers into consumers. As Gilbert and Strauss envisioned a new role for the toy industry in shaping American children,

¹⁰⁰ See John F. Kasson, “Dances of the Machine in Early Twentieth-Century America,” in Townsend Ludington, ed., *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 153-74.

Ford envisioned corporate power renewing America for a modern age by organizing its creative and consuming energies by rational principles. Thus Ford's rationalization of mass production and consumption would involve, as David Harvey writes, "a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society."¹⁰¹ But while Ford trumpeted his vision as an emancipation, it was a vision both unevenly installed and differently interpreted—and, to be sure, often resisted. Workers at Ford's Highland Park assembly line (online in 1913) voiced the fears of many when they compared the automated machines that paced their work to a "slave-driver."¹⁰²

The face of that slave-driver was often imagined to be black. Much like in the antebellum period, race became a primary mode for working-class Americans to articulate their grievances against the rush of economic transformation. Before his July 4, 1910 fight against Jim Jeffries, for instance, African-American boxer Jack Johnson was described in national newspapers as a modern machine, his body compared to a factory engine (muscles like "knotted pistons"), whereas his white opponent had a "natural" strength that reflected the vitality of white manhood. With Johnson popular audiences contemplated the black body not as an old plantation slave but as a fearful emblem of the machine age. Along with his machine-like speed, Johnson was imagined to embody modernity itself for his everyday ease with automobiles, extravagant globetrotting lifestyle, and interracial romance.¹⁰³ Indeed, following his career in boxing, Johnson would turn to auto racing, proudly posing for photographs with his car and his white wife as a statement of modernity for himself and for the race—a symbolic inversion of Strauss's

¹⁰¹ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 126; for the historical origins, uneven development, and cultural consequences of Fordism, see *ibid.*, 125-40.

¹⁰² Worker's wife quoted in David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: the Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 257; cited in Kasson, "Dances with Machines," 157.

¹⁰³ M. Jill Dupont, "'The Self in the Ring, the Self in Society': Boxing and American Culture from Jack Johnson to Joe Louis" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2000), chap. 1, esp. 44-48, 61-65; quotations from preliminary coverage of Johnson-Jeffries fight in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (April 5, 1910 and June 13, 1910), cited on p. 44.

pairing of Tombo and the Trikauto. Hence Johnson was feared among white audiences for his seemingly automated and “passive” fighting style that made a “toy”—in novelist Jack London’s words—of Jeffries’s “teacher.” At stake in this dance of white and black was not only the subjection of the racial other but the survival of a producerist ethos.¹⁰⁴

Johnson’s resounding KO victory was a cause for celebration in urban African American communities—North and South—that were growing due to a steady influx of migrants from the countryside, leaving the oppressions of sharecropping labor to take a risk on the freedoms promised by city life. As if following Hall’s most apocalyptic nightmares, whites targeted these communities following the Johnson fight and took to the street with the aim of exacting racial vengeance. Just as antebellum white wage workers had projected onto the figure of the slave their own anxieties over their loss of autonomy suffered at work and at home in the industrializing economy, so did turn-of-the-century factory and office workers see in the black boxer a crystallization of the arrayed forces that seemed to threaten their autonomy in the Fordist economy. Not only could Johnson stand for the thousands of African American southerners whose northward migration made them direct competitors for factory work; like the assembly line and the Taylorization of work routines, the black worker symbolized the devaluation of skilled labor and the shift in the foundation of identity from production to consumption. Thus the anti-black riot that erupted after the Johnson fight not only followed from a long line of working-class violence against black workers, but also anticipated riots in St. Louis and Houston in 1917, and during the Red Summer of 1919. As W. E. B. Du Bois would write later, such outpourings of

¹⁰⁴ Jack London, “Artful Dodger Will Be Teacher or Toy,” *Chicago Record-Herald* (1 July 1910), 11, cited in Dupont, “The Self in the Ring,” 60. See also Holt, *The Problem of Race in the 21st Century*, 78-80.

racist rage were in fact battles over who had claim to the new fable of consumerist abundance, the “front-room and victrola and even the dream of the Ford car.”¹⁰⁵

Tombo might have served as a displaced target for this outburst of racist violence: indeed play with Tombo might have more clearly affirmed a fantasy for a pastoral past restored along with white supremacy. Hall himself might have explained such acts of anti-black violence as a “natural” instinct of a superior race to eradicate a rising racial competitor.¹⁰⁶ But just as Hall had sought to redirect these primitive energies toward creation, rather than violent destruction, so did Tombo seek to direct the child’s energies away from destruction—whether of the black figure or the mechanism—but toward immersion with its movement. Like Johnson, Tombo’s “passive” automatism made it a “champion dancer of the world”; but in this case it was a dance that the child could master (“be made to move fast or slow”). The child would be a teacher to the toy.

Yet part of Tombo’s pedagogical function—if not its advertised delight—was precisely to teach the child to work with a machine. Here the value of Tombo’s blackface mask becomes apparent. It was meant not simply to substitute for an African American performer like Jack Johnson but to figure the mechanizing forces that Johnson seemed to embody. In this way Tombo’s dance can be compared to the more modern tempo of ragtime. Deriving from the cake walks and buck-and-wing dancing that African American musicians performed in “plant shows” of the 1890s, ragtime enjoyed an immense vogue after the turn of the century, its music performed in dancehalls and its compositions sold in printed songsheets. For African American composer and novelist James Weldon Johnson, the ragtime pianist (such as the famed Scott

¹⁰⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Work and Wealth,” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 87.

¹⁰⁶ Bederman argues that Hall’s advocacy of black uplift ironically reinforced the logic of lynching as a “natural” act; *Manliness and Civilization*, 114.

Joplin) was not only “master of a good deal of technique” but also a master over the body
republic. Ragtime seemed to dictate how its listeners would move in the modern world:

It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect.¹⁰⁷

This syncopated rhythm—a free riff played on one hand, a steady beat kept by the other—were enjoyed by a growing audience of white urban youth for giving sonic form to a particularly modern desire: a bodily vitality expressed in machine precision.¹⁰⁸

Rather than the work of a masterful black performer, ragtime was presented to the public as something out of time—a primitive essence or a modern shock. In the well-worn pattern of selling slavery, songsheet publishers sold ragtime as “coon” music, and displaced its origins from the contemporary hotbeds of African American musical production to the mythic “old plantation” by illustrating its covers with cotton fields and ramshackle cabins. The heightened racist caricature of its packaging corresponded to an abstraction of its meaning as the incipient music industry turned ragtime from an expression of black virtuosity into a commodified emblem of what historian David Suisman calls “the musical soundscape of modernity.”¹⁰⁹ In a newspaper limerick reprinted in *New Age* magazine in 1913, ragtime was less a musical representation of a natural vitality than a “novel shock” that “permeates existence”:

Oh, the ragtime of the present
Is in many ways unpleasant,

¹⁰⁷ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1913; New York: Vintage, 1989), 98-99.

¹⁰⁸ For the tension between modern and primitive in ragtime, and how it gave shape to the contemporary cultural transformation, see Holt, *Children of Fire*, 206; Susan Curtis, “Black Creativity and Black Stereotype: Rethinking Twentieth-Century Popular Music in America,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 125. See also Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁹ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, chap. 8.

For it makes sedate and proper tunes seem tame.
We stoutly disapprove it
And we threaten to remove it,
But it gets us all a-dancing just the same.

The writer pleaded to end the “craze for syncopation” with “ragtime legislation” because its pace “scares us half to death.” Without once alluding to its origins in black creativity or its imagined association with the old plantation, the limerick writer distilled the music to pure shock.¹¹⁰

Whereas blackface minstrelsy had furnished cultural space for the working class to respond to industrialization, ragtime quickly became appropriated by the masters of the machine age. For leaders of the corporate revolution of the American economy, the ideological value of ragtime was immediately recognizable. During the December 1915 meeting of the Duquesne Light Company in Pittsburgh, for instance, a “minstrel troupe” (as reported to the National Electric Light Association) regaled the bigwigs with “ragtime melodies” over chicken dinner before giving way to a speech by E. M. Herr, the president of Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. “The electrical industry is about to enter upon a stage where we will see it advance more rapidly than has ever been seen,” Herr declared. But while dreaming of electric cars and 500,000 kilowatt power generators, Herr wondered if the pace of America’s electrification would outrun human capacity to control it. There might come “a time when we shall fail in the undertakings that will come to us in the future, and these undertakings are of a magnitude that we can little conceive of at the present time.” His solution called for a more rigorous method of “building a man” that would confront him with “difficulties and then make him go through them.” The appeal of the blackface minstrel show and ragtime syncopation for this audience was ambiguous but widespread; the Duquesne chapter put on an annual company minstrel show with top executives playing as the “Ragtime Boys,” and other chapters of the

¹¹⁰ “Ragtime,” *Washington Star*, reprinted in *New Age Magazine* 19 (Aug. 1913), 22.

NELA put on similar shows throughout the decade.¹¹¹ Ragtime might have offered refuge from the disturbing powers unleashed by their work: disguising themselves as the black other allowed them to feel free in the rural “old plantation.” But it might also have served as a purposeful “difficulty” in which the white men could test their bodies against the syncopated rhythm: the blackface disguise allowed the very energies of the modern to course through them as their humanity—and their whiteness—emerged intact.

Tombo mirrored the popular face and function of ragtime: it enabled American audiences to engage and even learn from a machine while conserving the humanity and mastery of white men. Yet Tombo’s dance would contain alternative configurations of human agency with mechanical systems that Americans would also figure with ragtime and its more expressive offshoot, jazz. The American modernist Man Ray, for one, appropriated the racial form of jazz to figure his aesthetic visions of human emancipation through mechanization. In “Automaton” (1917; fig. 4.13), Man Ray distilled a three-piece jazz band (upright bass, drums, horns) into a minimal and schematic array of lines and curves. As Barbara Zabel suggests, for modernist artists like Man Ray, the machine was not only something to be humanized but something that would free the human to harness the energies of the modern world.¹¹² Of course, Man Ray was neither the first nor the last white male modernist to project his own ambivalent desires for mechanical abstraction onto the African American body, from Marinetti’s creation of a machine dance out of the “Negro cakewalk” to Le Corbusier’s yearning for the body and voice of Josephine Baker, a muse for natural and synthetic architectural design. Likewise, confronted with

¹¹¹ “Machine Building and Man Building,” *National Electric Light Association Bulletin* 10.1 (Jan. 1916), 45, 46; for the Duquesne Light Company minstrel show, see *NELA Bulletin* 10.2 (Feb. 1916), 126. In this the managers of electrical companies and members of the NELA were no different from other businessmen in hiring minstrel troupes to perform in banquets and luncheons. The same volume also reported a minstrel performances for the NELA Portland chapter (“A couple of real darky minstrels played ragtime” [299]), and the *NELA Bulletin* is replete with notices about minstrel shows among regional electrical companies throughout the 1910s.

¹¹² Barbara Zabel, *Assembling Art: the Machine and the American Avant-Garde* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

the Cubist works of Picasso and Braque shown at the Armory Show in 1913, American artist Stuart Davis was reminded of “the numerical precision of the Negro piano players in the Negro saloons.”¹¹³ In a later “aerograph” (substituting a paint brush for a mechanical airbrush), Man Ray apotheosized this association by abstracting “Jazz” itself into silhouettes of instruments tinted in primary colors (1919), the machine-like music a perfect subject for his machine-made art.¹¹⁴

For Man Ray, jazz figured both a primitive past and a modernist future. Indeed “Automaton” followed a period of experimentation in which he attempted to give aesthetic form to a new life with machines. He sought “a permanent and universal language of color, texture, and form” that did not require “the go-between of a ‘subject,’” he wrote in 1916, imagining a resolution to the Hegelian paradox in the form of a synthesis of pure being.¹¹⁵ “Automaton” and “Jazz” were results inspired by his forays into the vaudeville shows and jazz clubs in Manhattan. But he was equally inspired by the machine world then bustling around his home and studio by the Lexington Avenue subway. The “racket of concrete mixers and steamdrills...was music to me,” he later wrote, “but soon wore on our nerves.” Nevertheless it inspired his aesthetic turn “from nature to man-made productions,” from the confines of natural life to the new life in mechanical reproduction.¹¹⁶ The first result was *Rope Dancer*, an oil painting modeled on a collage of hand-cut construction paper that fragmented the figure of an acrobat as she traversed her apparatus (1916). But Man Ray did not merely want to represent, but to reproduce, the

¹¹³ Stuart Davis, *Stuart Davis* (1945), 23-24; quoted in Zabel, *Assembling Art*, 138.

¹¹⁴ In this way Man Ray’s perception of the “surface” of a jazz performer anticipated later modernist fascination with the skin of Josephine Baker, who herself transformed the “surface” interest into a cultural politics. See Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹¹⁵ Man Ray, catalogue for Anderson Galleries (March 13-25, 1916), quoted in Francis Naumann, “Man Ray Early Paintings 1913-1916: Theory and Practice in the Art of Two Dimensions,” *Artforum* (May 1982), 39. For Man Ray’s fascination with machines in this early period, which was expressed in modes of creation and destruction, see, Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), 65-68; Neil Baldwin, *Man Ray: American Artist* (New York: Crown, 1988), 58-60.

¹¹⁶ Man Ray, *Self-Portrait*, 65.

relationship with a machine at the point where the viewer engaged his art. Assembled out of multicolored bands of construction paper that had been left over from *Rope Dancer*, *Revolving Doors* was installed in a small Manhattan gallery as a kind of mobile: it invited viewers to touch the dangling pieces and thus involve themselves in the animation of artificial life (1916-17). Indeed Man Ray playfully described the animation of the “Mime” in the depersonalized technical syntax of a toy patent—the “arm bands carry out the intention to the surrounding space”—in which the human agency of the viewer dissipated into the device.¹¹⁷ Whereas *Rope Dancer* was a white being in the process of becoming a machine, and “Automaton” was a black being that had (always?) already been a machine, the “Mime” was an assemblage that had become a new kind of multi-colored being that drew in, reified, and refracted your own movement. Its exact reference, human or mechanical, is purposefully obscure; Man Ray named “Mime” only after the fact. Yet it captured a vision of plenitude and peace that existed not prior to but after the modern and among machines.

Man Ray had by then moved to the garment district around Madison Square, which was “quiet as the country” yet just blocks away from the Flatiron district, the heart of the teeming toy industry where the Ferdinand Strauss Corporation sold Tombo. “Mime” took the logic of Tombo’s choreography of race and technology to the extreme, using the “man-made” to transcend the limits of traditional social values and social conflicts—perhaps including the difference of race itself—in the automatism of the “man-made.”

¹¹⁷ Man Ray, from “Revolving Doors,” *TNT* (March 1919), reproduced in Rudolf E. Kuenzli, ed., *New York Dada* (New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1986), 152.

VI. The Laugh Business in the Racial Garden

The toy industry would not be outdone in surrealism. When Strauss's erstwhile protégé Louis Marx bought the Tombo line for a song in 1920, the legend goes, his competitors doubted there would remain much demand for such an old-fashioned thing in a marketplace now filling with wind-up cars and Charlie Chaplin toys. Of course, it sold by the millions.¹¹⁸ When he purchased the line from Strauss, Louis Marx extended the life of the cheap tin "negro jig dancer" by concentrating on direct advertising to retailers and mail-order consumers (he ran no toy stores) and amplifying the pace and quantity of manufacture. He also made the toy itself bigger, more colorful, and varied in costume and face: Tombo was soon joined by the Charleston Trio, Spic and Span "The Man's What Am," Dapper Dan Coon Jigger, and Jazzbo Jim—who appeared in whiteface after the 1960s. Thus Marx restyled Tombo's one-man minstrel show as a contemporary jazz band, a set that sold well through the 1920s—well enough for Marx to build his own business into the world's leading mechanical toy manufacturer. Yet he quickly adjusted the line once popular tastes changed. Black mechanical toys, writes historian Gary Cross, "gave way to dancing Mickey Mouse," a trend that Marx would duly capitalize on.¹¹⁹

This shift from Tombo to Mickey Mouse was hardly a sign of a popular turn against the racist caricature of Jazz-Bo Jims, let alone a bellwether of improving race relations. As contemporary audiences would have noted, Walt Disney framed his Mickey Mouse shorts in the old familiar of blackface minstrelsy and its plantation myth. Not only did "Steamboat Willie" (1928) recapitulate the standard plant show scenario of a steamboat race. In one famous sequence, a goat eats the sheetmusic for "Turkey in the Straw," a well-known minstrel tune that

¹¹⁸ Lawrence F. Greenfield, "Marx, Louis, Sr.," American National Biography Online (Feb. 2000), <http://www.anb.org/articles/10/10-01976.html>; accessed 24 February 2014. Marx bought Tombo along with the Climbing Monkey and the two toys combined to sell 16 million by 1922, making Marx a millionaire.

¹¹⁹ Cross, *Kids' Stuff*, 99-100; for Marx's line of racist toys, see Charles Dee Sharp, *The Wonder of American Toys, 1920-1950* (Portland, Ore.: Collectors Press, 2002), 256.

Mickey recovers by turning the goat into a living music box. As cel animation turned live-action minstrelsy and its trace of a “Negro stamp” into an art of mechanical reproduction, so did Mickey Mouse represent that transformation as its inversion: he reclaimed the machine-made sheetmusic for a Disneyfied second nature. Around 1929, Louis Marx Co. performed his own transformation in response, remodeling his wind-up jazz band minstrels into a Disney knock-off, the Marx Merry-makers, replete with oversized mouse ears and only 98 cents for the set.¹²⁰

Certainly, Tombo sits uncomfortably in a cultural spectrum that spans modernist art and Mickey Mouse, let alone one that includes Jack Johnson’s boxing or ragtime and jazz compositions. Yet as a cultural form it marks a crucial node between the cultural work of remembering American slavery and the work of remaking human subjectivity within the currents of modernization. Tombo gave racial form to changes in the structure of human agency and social relationships wrought by the impersonal networks of commodities and technology, what social theorist Jean Baudrillard would call in 1968 a system of objects. “With the advent of our consumer society, we are seemingly faced for the first time in history by an irreversible organized attempt to swamp society with objects and integrate it into an indispensable system designed to replace all open interaction between natural forces, needs, and techniques.”¹²¹ For Baudrillard, nothing captured the dilemma of this prospect more than the popular fascination with the robot of science fiction. “[F]or all its humanness, it always remains quite visibly an object, and hence a *slave*.” Of course, before “robot” had entered the American lexicon as a machine-man—and the American marketplace as a toy—there was Tombo, which marked the difference between autonomous subject and automated object by race. “In this way a threatening

¹²⁰ By the 1950s, Louis Marx Co.—that now was outsourcing production to Linemar, its Japanese production unit—was licensed by Disney to produce a line of mechanical toys from the Disney Disney Car to Mickey the Musician. For an apposite genealogy that links minstrelsy to Mickey, see Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Industry and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968), trans. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1996), 144.

part of myself has been exorcised and turned into a sort of all-powerful slave, cast in my image, which I can use for purposes of self-aggrandizement.”¹²²

The dynamics of exorcism conjured by the poststructuralist French theorist were not so remote from the everyday concerns of Americans who played with Tombo during its heyday.¹²³ Tombo’s social function was disclosed plainly in 1930—as a parody of itself. Just as its star was fading on the toy market, Tombo suddenly reappeared when screenwriter and popular author Homer Croy showed the readers of *The North American Review* the amusement industry “from the inside point of view.” He asked them to consider “this laugh business” not as a free human response to the “accidents” of Coney Island and other amusement parks, but as a consequence of deliberate planning by calculating managers, “s[itting] around a table with a lot of blueprints scattered over it.” The laugh business sought profit from human laughter commodified and standardized—“coolly calculated and scientifically nurtured.” But what fascinated Croy was the extent to which this reified laughter actually touched the human body. Gravity rides “jiggled and joggled” the body, while park attendants stood ready at switches to blow a jet of air up passing women’s skirts. But to describe the complete loss of bodily autonomy at the amusement park, Croy drew on his audience’s childhood memory of Tombo. Preying on a man who “thought he’d be wise” by avoiding the thrills of the barrel roll attraction, a park attendant, “who was standing there, unnoticed, reached out and touched him under his coat tails with an electric wand”:

Do you remember how suddenly he thought he was an Alabama Coon Jigger? He jiggled all over the place, because it isn’t fun to be touched with an electric spark when and where you’re not expecting it. Do you remember how you laughed in spite of yourself?

¹²² Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 130; original emphasis.

¹²³ Of course, for Baudrillard, the ultimate referent—imagined and historical—for his theorizing was the American system of mass consumerism that was taking shape in the turn of the century and would be exported to France following WWII. See Kristen Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

The Alabama Coon Jigger reappeared in 1930s Coney Island not as a toy but as a man transformed into a toy. It gave a name to the involuntary animation of the sovereign white man, who became subordinate to the attendant like a slave, and electrified like a machine. But the real joke, as Croy intimated, was that this spectacle of racial and mechanical transmogrification broadcast the reifying, coercive powers of the laugh business as something fun. As the “electric spark” drained the man of his self-possession, his electric motion caused the gathered crowd to “laugh[] in spite” of themselves.¹²⁴

Through its racialized play of mastery and servitude, Tombo performed a valuable cultural function: it allowed you to immerse your body and mind in the workings of a machine and make the experience feel like freedom. Yet this performance left behind an irritation. Since the formation of the republic Americans have preferred to escape to the pastoral garden rather than confront the political questions raised by the technological power of industrial capitalism, as Leo Marx has argued; and as we have seen, the old Southern plantation, especially when made available through the voice and care a black slave, has been among the most alluring imaginary territories for American escape alongside the Western frontier, the family farm, and the ocean.¹²⁵ But not only would Tombo shade this racial pastoralism into a racialized vision of technological utopia. In reanimating the old plantation in this form Tombo also reanimated the paradox this

¹²⁴ Homer Croy, “This Laugh Business,” *The North American Review* 230.3 (September 1930), 324, 325, 327, 329. In addition to writing novels and screenplays, Croy wrote several “inside” accounts of the mass amusement industry: *How Motion Pictures Are Made* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1918), *Coney Island* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1929), *Star Maker: The Story of D. W. Griffith* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1959).

¹²⁵ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The scholarship on antimodernism in turn-of-the-century American culture and as an aesthetic and critical response to corporate industrial capitalism is extensive. I have relied especially on Nick Yablon, *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Wai-chee Dimock, *Empire of Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Penguin, 1976); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

pastoral was meant to displace. Once again white Americans were invited to define their freedom through the pleasures of subjecting and consuming a reified racial other.¹²⁶ Tombo betrayed white Americans' renewed dependence on blackness, and their anxiety of succumbing to the preternatural power it seemed to hold over them. The racial pleasure betrayed an irritation that compelled Americans to even greater intimacy with the black machine.

By the time Croy called Tombo to mind, it named the fears it was meant to dispel: the mastery of machines that would mark the degeneracy of whiteness. Behind Tombo's stilled body and placid visage a black automaton loomed, as if to challenge the child to wind it up and overcome its dance again and again and again.

¹²⁶ For the classic historical analysis of the origins and emergence of the American paradox in socioeconomic practice and in republican ideology, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery/American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

EPILOGUE

Where does the history of selling slavery belong in the cultural history of America in the twentieth century? In 1918, African American composer R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943), for one, retroactively proclaimed the “Emancipation of Negro Music” in a plantation performance in Carnegie Hall in 1902. Thanks to the work of missionaries, folklorists, teachers, composers, performers, and other “black pioneers,” as he wrote in the *Southern Workman*, the black secular song forged in slavery was now freed “from the chains of false and often low ideals set upon it by popular minstrelsy,” and made way for its presentation “as a wonderful thing, a gift, an art, a glorious contribution to this nation and the world.”¹

If Dett took up W. E. B. Du Bois’s redemptive vision of the “Sorrow Songs,” however, he also hearkened back to the strategies of Billy McClain, who had likewise turned popular appetites for the authentic old plantation into a cultural staging ground for black freedom. Dett displaced the date of emancipation from the debut of *Black America* to the Friday-evening Hampton Negro and Indian Folk-Lore Concert at Carnegie Hall, New York, on the evening of Friday, March 7, 1902. Then the Hampton chorus performed “work songs, cradle songs, game and dance songs” of the plantation “with proper dramatic action,” and with “use of stage settings representing the actual physical conditions under which the songs were composed and used.” In other words, a refined and progressive plantation spectacle, whose dynamics African Americans had harnessed to a new “use”: “by their use a new light is thrown on what slavery really meant to the Negro; and the value of his music as a characteristic means of racial expression was clearly demonstrated.”² What’s more, even though Dett, then the Director of Vocal Music at Hampton Institute, also shared Du Bois’s classical tastes, he linked ragtime to the emancipatory movement

¹ R. Nathaniel Dett, “The Emancipation of Negro Music,” *The Southern Workman* (April 1918), 176.

² Dett, “The Emancipation of Negro Music,” 175.

of black music, composing a raucous “Dance Juba” for his *In the Bottoms* suite (1913). Dett described “Dance Juba” as a reflection of “the social life of the people,” and spur to motion at once automating and freeing: its off-kilter time “urge[s] on a solo dancer to more frantic (and at the same time more fantastic) endeavors,” while also urging a fiddler who, “forgetful of self[,]...does the impossible in the way of double-stopping and bowing.”³

The ascent of a toy like Tombo showed how such a vision could become degraded in the marketplace; culture industries performed their own “emancipation of Negro music” by abstracting its ties to any actual African American performer, let alone to any vernacular tradition. Indeed Tombo’s rendition of black dance reanimated a performance of racial slavery to compensate its user for his loss of autonomy in the mass marketplace. That the status of the African American performer and the mass consumer seemed to be aligned in this cultural economy did not go unnoticed. James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), for one, joined Dett’s celebration of black cultural emancipation while also grappling with the problem set out in Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Like his mentor Du Bois, Johnson saw in the mass marketing of black culture a potential for the recognition of African Americans as “co-workers in the Kingdom of Culture” and thereby redeem the nation’s promise of freedom. Yet Johnson would depart from Du Bois’s language of “blending” and “debasements” to address the mechanical mode of cultural reproduction. In *Black Manhattan* (1930), Johnson would claim the plantation spectaculars as not only an origin for the ragtime craze but more pointedly as an incipient formation of African American performing talent, centered in Manhattan’s Tenderloin district and then Harlem, who produced ragtime through songs, cake-walks, and vaudeville, on stage and screen. Johnson had

³ Dett quoted in Jon Michael Spencer, “R. Nathaniel Dett’s Views on the Preservation of Black Music,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 10.2 (Autumn 1982), 145; and see Ernest D. Brown, Jr., “African American Instrument Construction and Music Making,” in Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia J. Maulsby, eds., *African American Music: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 26.

been a part of this world. With his brother J. Rosamond Johnson he moved to New York City in 1901 and fell in with the city's teeming scene of black musical theater, where his success writing lyrics to hits such as "Under the Bamboo Tree" (published in 1901; recorded on wax cylinder in 1903) gave him the financial and social capital to launch a singular career as a diplomat, novelist, and civil rights activist.

In New York, Johnson learned firsthand about the paradoxical value of black story, song, and movement in American mass culture: the more popular it became in the market and the more it touched American lives, the more its "Negro originators" disappeared into invisibility. In his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), at first published anonymously by a small press, Johnson framed the problem as an existential choice faced by his fair-skinned protagonist. While moved to claim "old slave songs" as his heritage and marry them to "modern ragtime" and so express the "glory" of his race to the American mass public, he recoiled at the sight of a Southern lynching: an image not only of the public's debased evaluation of black life but also the cannibalizing energies by mass cultural industry that consumes its own "originators."⁴ Johnson thus deferred the redemption of the "slave song" to the future, less a heritage from the past than a heritage to come, because African Americans are "still too close to the conditions under which the songs are produced": "the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro." Rather than use his musical talent to hazard the grand political and social movement of "making history and a race," Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* chose a living death—to become invisible as "a successful white man who has

⁴ Johnson, *Autobiography*, 139-40. See also Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), chap. 4, for a penetrating reading of Johnson's *Autobiography* as a record of how "lynching reveals mass-cultural acquisitiveness to be a life-denying force" (210).

made a little money.” Sometimes, though, “I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother’s people.”⁵

Johnson would go on to live the life that the Ex-Colored Man denied for himself. In addition to serving in the NAACP, where by 1920 he had risen to the rank of executive secretary, Johnson compiled *The Book of Negro Poetry* (1922) and wrote an introductory essay that argued for African Americans’ central place in the history of American culture. Here he again turned to ragtime to imagine how African Americans might redeem their own cultural value in the circuits of the industrializing cultural economy. Yet to the passages about ragtime he had written in *Autobiography* (and which he reproduced word-for-word in *Negro Poetry*) Johnson added a supplementary origin: “Ragtime songs, like Topsy, ‘jes’ grew.” By likening its social life to Stowe’s excessively animated racial creature, Johnson displaced the origins of ragtime from the “natural” cultural expression of African Americans to the cultural systems that reproduced those expressions, from the racialized body of the “genuine” plantation slave to slavery’s institution of social death, from the embodied remembrance of “slave songs” to the industrial processes of selling slavery. Indeed, by tracing ragtime from “colored piano players” along the Mississippi River Valley northward to Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition and then to Manhattan’s Tin Pan Alley music industry, Johnson described a dynamic congruent with the fate of African American cultural work in plantation spectacles, printed and bound folklore, photography, and mechanical toys: Because they carried the seemingly authentic value of the old plantation, they “sprang into immediate popularity and earned small fortunes” for white composers and publishers, but at the cost of “divorc[ing] Ragtime from the Negro.” Yet for all that “jes’ grew” did “not abolish in any way the claim of the American Negro as [ragtime’s] originator.” Just as Billy McClain to Charles Chesnutt traded on their perceived authentic racial value to intercede in

⁵ Johnson, *Autobiography*, 182, 211, 210.

the cultural industrial works, African American songwriters sparked their own careers by “appropriat[ing] about the last one of the old ‘jes’ grew’ songs”: “We took it, re-wrote the verses,...and published the song....It became very popular with college boys.”⁶

What saved these African American “originators” from invisibility in the whirl of the mass marketplace was the “Negro stamp” they printed on the ragtime product. Where the Ex-Coloured Man saw death, Johnson saw the grounds for renewed life. Through ragtime, Johnson argued, African American cultural workers had touched the body of the American consumer with a purposefully blackened mark of mechanical reproduction:

Any one who witnesses a musical production in which there is dancing cannot fail to notice the Negro stamp on all the movements....That peculiar swaying of the shoulders which you see done everywhere by the blond girls of the chorus is nothing more than a movement from the Negro dance..., the “eagle rock.” Occasionally the movement takes on a suggestion of the, now outlawed, “shimmy.”⁷

If cultural moralists and racist fearmongers saw in ragtime a nightmare of miscegenation and civilizational degeneracy come to life, Johnson saw a moment when the automated consumerism of the “blond girls” met the “Negro stamp” of its mechanical reproduction. More than a cultural transgression of classical musical form and Jim Crow segregation, ragtime spun a choreography where white and black could recognize each other as consumers and “originators” of a shared modernity. Its “originality”—a manufactured novelty and human origination—was “proof that Ragtime possess the vital spark, the power to appeal universally, without which any artistic production,...is dead.” For Johnson, ragtime was emancipatory for this “vital spark” that allowed both performer and listener to outmaneuver the deadening mechanism that governed its mass production and consumption, and transmit this energy across the nation and the globe.⁸ If the

⁶ Johnson, Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, x, xi-xii.

⁷ Johnson, Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, xiv, ix.

⁸ Johnson had earlier conceptualized the “stamp” in *Autobiography* as an imprint of an “unhappy experience[]” on the memory, not “written” by hand but “stamped there with a die”: “these are the tragedies of life” (20). For the

spirituals would restore the American soul with a memory of human sorrow and endurance in slavery, as Du Bois had argued in 1903 and as Johnson recited in 1913 and 1922, ragtime revealed the point where African American cultural workers could set that redemptive transaction in motion.

Johnson's optimistic theory of African American cultural history anticipated similar rationales by which African American cultural entrepreneurs and practitioners took to the phonograph, radio, printing press, department store, cinema, and advertising to translate the value created by the "Negro stamp" into a cultural politics of civil rights.⁹ But what "Negro stamp" survived when it "jes' grew" beyond the reach of those who made it?

In either case the "Negro stamp" was subsumed and degraded. Indeed the erasure of the "Negro stamp" within the currents of a now globalizing American mass culture was so successful that it marked the perception of two of its most perceptive critiques: Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. By the 1930s, Benjamin and Adorno might have encountered a Tombo or any number of other American-made racist toys in Frankfurt, Berlin, Paris, or, for Adorno by 1938, New York City. In the Germany of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, the "Negro stamp" in American popular culture was not only further abstracted but diffused into a general reference to Americanness. Mickey Mouse and jazz were grouped alongside mechanical toys, the Ford assembly line, and slapstick comedy as emblems of the machine age; so would they be vilified by the Nazis as signs of racial degradation.¹⁰

resonance of this metaphor for contemporary understandings of the arts of mechanical reproduction, see Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, 195.

⁹ See Lizabeth Cohen, "Mass Culture at the Grassroots"; Green, *Selling the Race*.

¹⁰ Without a sense of irony, Hitler was himself a fan of the Disney creature, and German pilots decorated their bombers with the iconic mouse ears. My gloss of Benjamin and Adorno is informed by Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Micky-Maus," in *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 163-82.

Even though Benjamin would never address the problem of race in his study of American mass culture, he governed his understanding of redemption with a concept of difference. What Johnson might have seen as a remaining “Negro stamp” Benjamin saw as an “alien rhythm” of a renewed humanity. Had he seen a Tombo toy its blackness might have signified not the toy’s “race” but its “class character,” a manifestation of its complex (non-handmade) origins in the mechanical processes of production and consumption. In their “grinning masks,” modern mechanical toys like Tombo presented the child with “the hideous features of commodity capital” itself: “they gape at you alluringly from the mouth of the black cannon.”¹¹ Taking a step further, however, he speculated that the misuse of toys held the potential for children to transform both those relations and themselves. Most optimistically, he dreamed of a child taking up a toy “once mislaid, broken, and repaired”—a “princely doll,” say—and turning it into a “capable proletarian comrade.”¹² More critically, he imagined the child playing with a toy as an “experiment” in adopting “the often alien rhythm of another human being.” Out of this dialectical play, Benjamin argued that we might “gain possession of ourselves.”¹³ Benjamin saw the same potential in Mickey Mouse, whose animated films showed mass audiences how to survive to mechanization of their sensory experience and forge a new basis for humane social relationships. Although he could overlook Disney’s digestion and excretion of minstrelsy, Benjamin claimed Mickey Mouse as a redemptive figure for its embodiment of a liminal difference. Mickey Mouse was a therapeutic “dream for contemporary man”: “His life is full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them. For the most extraordinary thing about them is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Toys and Play: Marginal Notes on a Monumental Work” (1928), in *Selected Writings*, 2:119.

¹² Walter Benjamin, “Old Toys: The Toy Exhibition at the Märkisches Museum” (1928), in *Selected Writings*, 2:101. For the misuse value of toys, see Bill Brown, “How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story),” *Critical Inquiry* 24.4 (Summer 1998): 935-64.

¹³ Benjamin, “Toys and Play,” 2:120.

have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse....Nature and technology, primitiveness and culture, have completely merged.”¹⁴

For Adorno, however, the redemptive potential of jazz was betrayed by its dependence on a reified racial nostalgia for its cultural value. Whatever “Negro stamp” remained in jazz was not a “vital spark” but a product of the culture industry, through and through:

The extent to which jazz has anything at all to do with genuine black music is highly questionable; the fact that it is frequently performed by blacks and that the public clamors for “black jazz” as a sort of brand-name doesn’t say much about it....Today, in any case, all of the formal elements of jazz have been completely abstractly pre-formed by the capitalist requirements that they be exchangeable as commodities.

What Adorno objected to was not only the abstraction of blackness as a marketing ploy (“the skin of the black man functions as much as coloristic effect as does the silver of the saxophone”) but its use of the “mythic mystification of the black man” as a representation of a state of being uncorrupted by modernity. Thus jazz not only “abstractly feign[ed] progressiveness”; Adorno speculated about its eventual “use by fascism” against its “surface tendency to reach back to pre-capitalist, feudal forms of immediacy.” Yet it is with some irony that as Adorno stripped jazz of a mystifying racial association with prelapsarian authenticity (without ever naming the old plantation as its imaginary setting), he unveiled jazz as a medium for enslavement, a coercive mechanism of the capitalist culture industry. For Adorno, commercial jazz was all the more insidious for providing an illusion of individual freedom and creative power through a black face. Through jazz a listener “feels itself, as a mutilated subject, at one with the mutilating authority, and transfers this authority onto itself in such a way that it now believes itself to be ‘able.’”¹⁵

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty” (1933), in *Selected Writings*, 2:734-35.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Jazz” (1936), in *Essays on Music*, Richard Leppert, ed., and Susan H. Gillespie, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 477, 482, 484-85, 491. For Adorno’s critique of racial essentialism, and critical charges against his own Eurocentrism, see James Buhler, “Frankfurt School Blues: Rethinking Adorno’s

By 1937, Benjamin transferred his redemptive investment in Mickey Mouse onto Charlie Chaplin for his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”; by 1944, in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Adorno transposed the jazz mechanism onto the figure of Donald Duck who “receive[d] [his] beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs.”¹⁶ These essays are notable not only for now being central to American cultural studies; they were among the first to identify the realm of cultural economy as a new site for the reproduction of political and social power, and to debate the role of technology, corporate organization, and material conditions of mass production and consumption in fostering—or nullifying—the chance for human emancipation.

In the light of this history, Benjamin and Adorno can be counted not only among the first philosophers of mass culture but also among the last critics of selling slavery. Indeed Tombo was perhaps a better example of the coercion Adorno saw in jazz than any actual jazz recording. “It is not old and repressed instincts which are freed in the form of standardized rhythms and standardized explosive outbursts; it is new, repressed, and mutilated instincts which have stiffened into the masks of those in the distant past.”¹⁷ Not a romantic survival of the human movement of a racial other within mechanical motion, but a reified mask of blackness that mystifies the subject’s own mutilation by the machine. What Benjamin and Adorno overlooked, however, were the African American cultural workers who were called to free a lost vitalism in the form of the rhythms and outbursts of modernity, while wearing the masks of the old plantation “coon.” It was this labor that toys like Tombo—and Mickey Mouse on the Steamboat, and jazz in the Cotton Club—abstracted into standardized, automated forms. That both Benjamin

Critique of Jazz,” in Berthold Hoeckner, ed., *Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 104-10.

¹⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, ed., and Edmund Jephcott, trans. (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 110.

¹⁷ Adorno, “On Jazz,” 478.

and Adorno could overlook the “Negro stamp” of these forms—and fail to recognize or account for its place in their conceptualization of the culture industry—likely has less to do with any veiled racism lurking in the heart of the Frankfurt School than with the success of the American culture industry in erasing the trace of African American cultural labor in abstraction or caricature.¹⁸ Nevertheless, absent any consideration of a “Negro stamp”—or the imprint of any countervailing agency at the point of production—Adorno could proceed to construct his own dialectical mechanism of critical theory.

The Frankfurt School has since been faulted for overlooking race in their critiques of American mass culture, and Adorno especially for his blithe dismissal of jazz. So, too, were African American cultural practitioners and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance and after faulted for failing to recognize the radical potential of their own position in the American mass cultural economy. “It goes without saying that the Negro intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance could not see the implications of cultural revolution as a *political demand* growing out of the advent of mass communications media,” Harold Cruse famously complained in 1967. “Having no cultural philosophy of their own, they remained under the tutelage of irreverant white radical ideas [*sic*]. Thus they failed to grasp the radical potential of their own movement.”¹⁹

The novelist Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) was born just at the cusp of this cultural revolution, and in his writing he attempted to recharge the relationship between African American culture and mass culture with emancipatory potential. Oklahoma-born, he moved to New York City after graduating from the Tuskegee Institute in 1937, where he had majored in

¹⁸ Benjamin gave far more attention to the racist ideology of the Nazi’s anti-Semitic state. Tantalizingly, in a radio lecture for children on “The Mississippi Flood of 1927,” Benjamin alludes to his preparations for a future installment on “America’s greatest and most dangerous secret society, next to which all bands of whiskey smugglers and criminal gangs are child’s play: the Ku Klux Klan,” who exemplified for him “the raging elements of human cruelty and violence” (broadcast on Radio Berlin, March 23, 1932); in Lecia Rosenthal, ed., and Jonathan Lutes, trans., *Radio Benjamin* (New York: Verso, 2014), 180.

¹⁹ Harold Cruse, “Mass Media and Cultural Democracy,” in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967), 65.

classical music, worked for a time as a jazz trumpeter, and versed himself in modernist poetry. In Harlem, he fell in with the remaining bright lights of the Renaissance, befriending artist Romare Bearden and engaging the support of novelist Richard Wright, who encouraged Ellison's literary talent and supported his early career. In this milieu, Ellison joined the Communist Party and for party publications such as *New Masses* he wrote about black politics within the framework of Marxian class analysis. He was especially interested in examining the relation between African Americans and technology, which he presented as allegories of African American life amid the forces of the state, capitalism, and mass media.²⁰ Much later, he would claim the black folk hero John Henry as a symbol of resistance against the "necessary rage for progress in American life," and black culture "at least as valuable as all our triumphs of technology."²¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, however, Ellison saw the line between black culture and technology becoming blurred, and put African Americans at the vanguard of cultural transformation.

Ellison twice focused on the possibilities and perils of African Americans' structural position in American mass culture. When he investigated the work of FDR's wartime Fair Employment Practices Committee in Harlem for *The New Masses* in 1942, Ellison interviewed the aunt of a "machine-crazy" young man named William who had been shut out of skilled industrial work, even though "he could take any kind of machine apart and fix it and put it together again." William might have been cast in the same mold of "mechanical genius" as Harriet Beecher Stowe's George Harris; instead he was a victim of another wartime state shot through with Jim Crow. William found no appeal in the FEPC and enlisted in the Merchant

²⁰ My remarks on Ellison have been informed by Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 107-8, as well as Ellison's own account of the genesis of *Invisible Man*: "Introduction" (November 10, 1981), in *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage, 1995), vii-xxiii.

²¹ Ralph Ellison, "Some Questions and Some Answers," *Prevues* (May 1985), in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 270. For John Henry, see Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 120-24.

Marine, in whose service he died when his ship was sunk by German submarines.²² Yet for Ellison the African American future in the United States would depend on being “machine-crazy.” Although he was budget-conscious and “gadget-resistan[t],” Ellison and his wife “plunge[d]” into the “new electronic world” at a 1949 Audio Fair in New York. “I was obsessed with the idea of reproducing sound with such fidelity,” he recalled in 1955, that “it would reach the unconscious levels of the mind with the least distortion.” The communion between sound and unconscious was achieved through extreme intimacy between the couple’s bodies and the technology. Though he and his wife “were almost crushed in our sleep by the tape machine,” with “wires and pieces of equipment all over the tiny apartment,” Ellison found it “worth it.” “[I]ts magic with mood and memory” was the conduit by which black musical tradition would survive an age when “the meanings of one’s origin are so quickly lost.”²³ In this vision, the “Negro stamp” and its technological mode of reproduction “jes’ grew” together.

In his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison compassed these two extremes with his titular narrator: an unnamed Southern black migrant turned “thinker-tinker” in an underground New York hovel. In his allegorical journey from the rural South to the industrial metropolis, the narrator follows the path of the Great Migration. But his progress is marked by transformative shocks of electricity he is forced to endure at the hands of machine-wielding whites, South and North, from having to scramble across an electrified mat to collect his winnings in a Southern Battle Royale to being electrocuted in an unnamed city hospital. The latter shock followed an argument with a black foreman, Lucius Brockway, who is distrustful of the narrator as a scab

²² Ralph Ellison, “The Way It Is,” *The New Masses* (October 20, 1942), in *Shadow and Act*, 287.

²³ Ralph Ellison, “Living with Music,” *High-Fidelity* (December 1955), in *Shadow and Act*, 194-96, 198. In fact, Ellison would initially have difficulty assembling the machine, causing him to call on David Sarser, a famed sound engineer for Phillips Electronics Company, who wrote the article about the sound system which Ellison was trying to replicate; the two men would become lifelong friends. See Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 251.

worker and potential union member. “They got all this machinery, but that ain’t anything,” Lucius, tells the narrator. “[W]e the machines inside the machines.”²⁴ Instead of working the machine from within, the narrator spars with Lucius, and the resulting explosion sends him to a hospital where he endures electroshock therapy. He is reborn in a state of abjection—not a slave but a slave-machine:

The machine droned, and I knew definitely that they were discussing me and steeled myself for the shocks, but was blasted nevertheless. The pulse came swift and staccato, increasing gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes....

“Look, he’s dancing,” someone called.

“No, really?”

An oily faced looked in. “They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” it said with a laugh.

The narrator was an invisible human for dancing like a Tombo toy, and for being born like Topsy. (“A machine my mother?” he ponders. “Clearly, I was out of my head.”) As he ponders the possibility of escape, the narrator rules out “short-circuiting the machine” because it might electrocute him, destroying himself along with the machine. But he discovers that the “one constant flaw” to his emancipation was less his body than “myself”: “There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity....When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.”²⁵

Freedom, for the Invisible Man, does not mean discovering the proper image with which to represent his identity, an image that the narrator—and Ellison—withhold from the reader’s sight. Instead the second half of the novel follows the narrator’s search for a place, and the tools, with which to broadcast his identity. After his release from the hospital, the invisible man discovers that the problem of freedom in mid-century America is inseparable from the problem of engaging the social relations and material conditions of American modernity—conditions that

²⁴ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 197, 217.

²⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 237-8, 240, 243.

have been and continue to be reinforced with ideologies of racial difference. In one of the novel's most famous scenes, the narrator stands appalled as he sees a former member of the Communist Party, Brother Clifton, hawking dancing Sambo dolls on the street, his body anticipating the motion of the racist doll and thus Clifton himself "*falls outside history*."²⁶ The invisible man, too, breaks from the Party's dogmatism and falls outside of history—but with the intention to push back. He retreats to an underground basement where he constructs a private empire of technology, redirecting electricity from the Monopolated Light and Power to fuel his 1,369 lightbulbs and phonograph that plays Louis Armstrong's "Why Am I So Black and Blue?"²⁷ In a universalizing gesture, the narrator turned the paradoxical position of himself and of African Americans in urban industrial society—at once an electrified dancer and the single drop of black that purifies the white—into a claim on the future of the American self: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"²⁸

How such a gesture could be translated into an emancipatory politics of civil rights or social transformation, let alone a program of cultural integration that Ellison himself would later favor, was unclear. While some critics have celebrated Ellison's art as an Afro-Futurist text that uses the African American body to figure the birth of an emancipatory posthuman subject, others have seen in it an example of Ellison's liberal naivety toward the racism that was seemingly endemic to the material conditions of American progress. Critic Houston A. Baker condemned Ellison's position in the canon of African American literature as a product of "America's industrial, democratic, lobotomizing machine"; instead of protesting that machine Ellison had become a "clubbable monster." For Baker, Ellison's *Invisible Man* was a "failed memory" because his faith in the "raceless" possibility of industrial technology forestalled any critical

²⁶ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 431-34; see also Brown, "The American Uncanny," 202-3.

²⁷ The invisible man is not satisfied with just one phonograph: "I plan to have five." Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.

²⁸ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.

stance against the racist effects of a globalizing American capitalism. Linking Ellison to images of an assimilated and acquiescent Uncle Tom, Baker seemed only a step away from replacing “monster” with “slave”—or robot.²⁹

Baker might also have had in mind the nightmare imagined by Ishmael Reed in his historical novel of the 1920s, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972): the Talking Android. Rather than a machine like Tombo, the Android was a black person chosen by the white corporate elite to serve as their mouthpiece, in effect manufacturing a “Negro viewpoint” using their own black automaton. They deployed the Android to defuse the revolutionary energies of jazz, what Reed—citing James Weldon Johnson—termed “Jes Grew.” The white corporate power—the Atonists—fear the “Jes Grew epidemic” for challenging their hegemony by loosening the sexual and political energies of the populace, white and black alike. By putting Jes Grew “in the hands of the press and radio,” the Atonists’ Talking Android will make jazz safe for consumption by convincing African Americans it has no origin in African American creativity and struggle: “the Talking Android...will tell the J.G.C.s [Jes Grew Coloreds] that Jes Grew is not ready and owes a large debt to Irish Theatre. This Talking Android will Wipe That Grin Off Its Face. He will tell it that it is derivative. He will accuse it of verbal gymnastics, of pandering to White readers.” The Talking Android could convince because in the culture industry African Americans “have no control over who speaks for them.”³⁰

In his imaginary return to the Jazz Age Reed marked the moment when selling slavery came full circle, when a machine was built to reproduce blackness without black people. But for Reed just as for Ellison and Johnson (and Benjamin and Adorno), emancipation did not begin by

²⁹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 31; quoted in Ampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 548; see also Baker, “Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant-Garde,” *Stanford Humanities Review* 7.1 (1999) [online: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/7-1/html/baker.html>; accessed 3 March 2012].

³⁰ Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 69.

turning back to a more authentic origin. It meant returning to the futures that had been opened up when African Americans brought the ideals of freedom to meet the power of a massifying culture industry. In the final pages of *Mumbo Jumbo*, PaPa LaBas, the Harlem voodoo man who unmasked the Atonist conspiracy, delivers his annual lecture on Jes Grew to a class of college students. From his vantage in the 1960s, when it appears that “jes grew” has won out (everyone now “using the word Man as a fugitive part of speech”), LaBas decouples “jes grew” from the processes of cultural production and posits it as an elemental force locked in eternal battle with its antagonist, Western reason itself. Yet the final image is not of a paradise regained in a mythical an old plantation or Africa, but a gesture toward the historicity of American culture—if not integration than a fugitive incursion. Recalling another hero of the Jazz Age, PaPa LaBas beats on against the current of American progress. As he is borne back ceaselessly toward the past, however, the closer he returns to the radical potential opened up in the cannibalizing processes of selling slavery, and the faster he drives his 1914 Locomobile Town Coupe toward the future:

What’s your point? they asked in Seattle whose central point, the Space Needle, is invisible from time to time. What are you driving at? they would say in Detroit in the 1950s. In the 40s he haunted the stacks of a ghost library. In the 30s he sought to recover his losses like everybody else. In the 20s they knew. And the 20s were back again. Better . . . Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around. (*Locomobile rear moving toward neon Manhattan skyline. Skyscrapers gleam like magic trees. Freeze frame.*)³¹

From the history of selling slavery—from the vantage of electrified plantation shows and from the off-kilter dances of mechanical slaves—we can see anew the familiar sight of a neon Manhattan and its gleaming skyscrapers. We can see the work of race that made a culture of this modernity, parceled out its gains and losses, ordered its visibilities and invisibilities, its progress and its ghosts. We can begin to see a cultural history that spans slavery and the Space Needle.

³¹ Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 216, 218.

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CU	Rare Books & Manuscript Collection, Columbia University
HL	Houghton Library, Harvard University
NMAH	Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution
NYHS	New York Historical Society
NYPL	New York Public Library
YCA	Yale Collection of American Literature Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

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APPENDIX: FIGURES

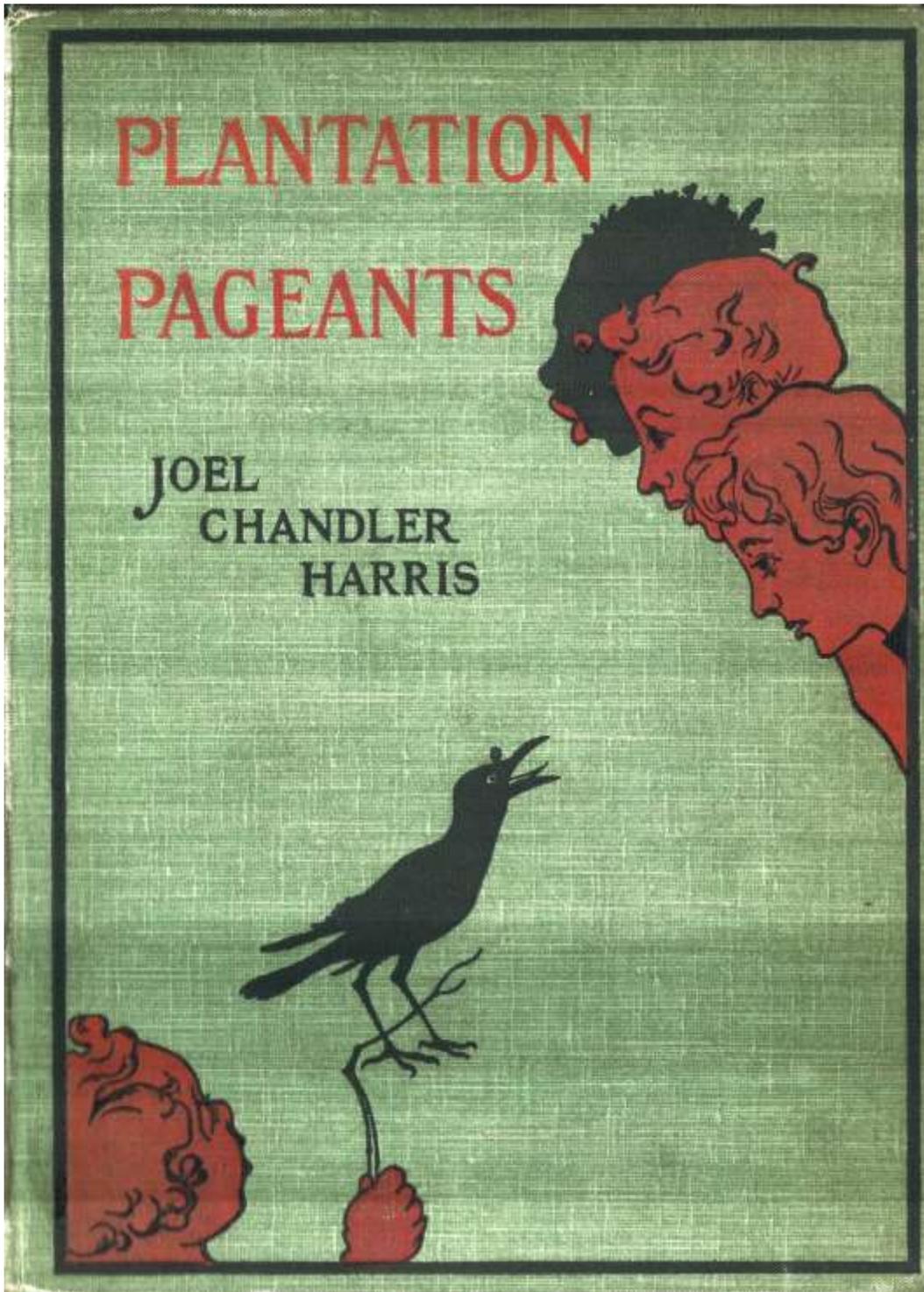


Figure I.1. Joel Chandler Harris, *Plantation Pageants*, E. Boyd Smith, designer (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1899).

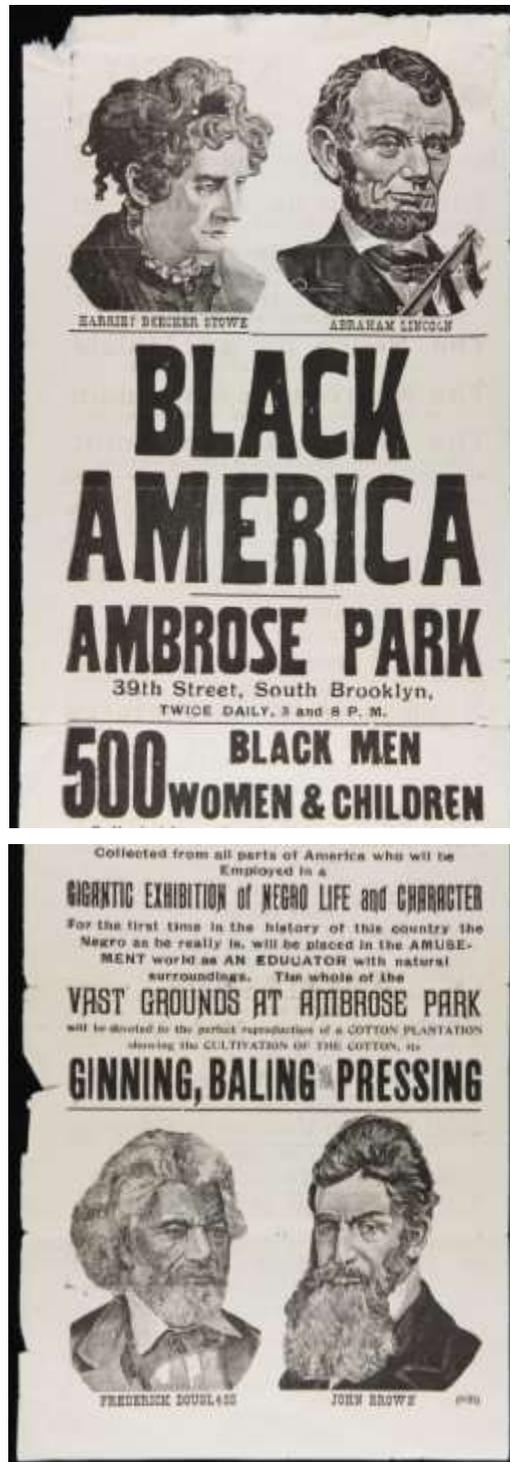


Figure 1.1. *Black America* broadside (Hartford, Ct.: Calhoun Printing Co., ca. 1895), in Nathan Salsbury Papers (box 1, folder 21), Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. (Single piece but scanned for reproduction in two parts.)

TWENTY-ONE ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE BROOKLYN STRIKE IN THIS NUMBER.

HARPER'S WEEKLY

JOURNAL OF CIVILIZATION

Vol. XXIX—No. 198
Published July 11, 1895, & thereafter
at New York, N. Y.

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1895.

TEN CENTS A COPY.
FOUR DOLLARS A YEAR.



THE STRIKE IN BROOKLYN—FIRING AT THE MOB—DRAWN BY T. DART WALKER
A Detail of the Seventh Regiment meeting the Mob with Newspaper Men on State Avenue, Evening of January 21st.

Figure 1.2. T. Dart Walker, “The Streets in Brooklyn—Firing at the Mob,” *Harper’s Weekly* (Feb. 2, 1895). Photo: Michael Donovan/Visual Resource Center, University of Chicago.



Figure 1.3. Promotional envelope for Nate Salsbury's *Black America* (ca. 1895), in Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American Collection (series II, box 37, folder 1151). Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

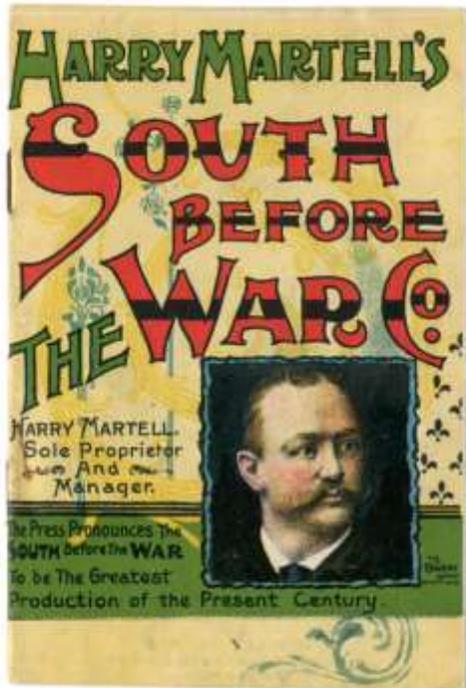


Figure 1.4. Cover of promotional pamphlet for Harry Martell's *South Before the War* (c. 1895?), in *South Before the War Company Papers* (box 1, folder 1), Irving S. Gilmore Music Library of Yale University.



Figure 1.5. "Count Them! And be Convinced of the Enormity of this Show." (Photograph by Baker's Art Gallery, Columbus, Ohio.) Interior spread of promotional pamphlet for Martell's *South Before the War*, in *South Before the War Company Papers*.

SOUTH BEFORE THE WAR.

UN-PARALLELED.



PICKING COTTON.
 "The original and only show of its kind on the American stage."
 Traveling on its own \$12,000 Pullman Palace Car.

INCOMPARABLE.

Most Realistic Scene on any Stage.

A Holiday scene at the Steamboat landing. Fifty Fun-makers having a glorious time
Providing a Plethora of Pure Plantation Pastimes.



LANDING OF THE ROBT. E. LEE.
 Fifty Sugar-rolling, Cotton Stowing, Hilarious, Hallelujah, Howling,
 Genuine Southern Dardies.

True to River-Life in every Essential Detail

Figure 1.6. "Picking Cotton" and "Landing of the Robt. E. Lee": the advertising for the show blended appeals to realism, originality, frivolity, and professionalism; viewers were promised not only an "incomparable" scene of slave labor, but also the quality of a company which could afford "its own \$12,000 Pullman Palace Car." Promotional pamphlet for Martell's *South Before the War*, in South Before the War Company Papers.



Figure 1.7. In official correspondence, Martell would impress theater managers and booking agents with images of massive scale supervised by his management: actors overflowing the company's train cars, under the command of Martell's serene visage. Promotional letterhead for Harry Martell's Merry Makers Company: Spectacular Pantomime Co. and South Before the War Co. (c. 1895?), in box 1, folder 1, South Before the War Company Papers.



Figure 1.8. Company photograph with train car, "Hattie," in background (n.d.), in box 1, folder 1, South Before the War Company Papers.



Figure 1.9. Photograph spread of scenes from Nate Salsbury's *Black America*. From top-left: (a) The laughing song; (b) The cotton press; (c) John Brown's portrait; (d) The quadrille party; (e) Boxers; (f) A choral study; (g) The called bluff; (h) Dancers; (i) Color-bearer; (j) The Amazons; (k) Ninth U.S. Cavalry. From "In the Gloaming," *Illustrated American* (29 June 1895), 828.



Figure 1.10. “Way Down South in Dixie,” photograph of Nate Salsbury’s *Black America* in “In the Gloaming,” *Illustrated American* (29 June 1895), 826.



Figure 1.11. “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion.” Still from D. W. Griffith, dir., *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).



Figure 1.12. “By Way of Love Valley.” Still from Griffith, dir., *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).



Figure 1.13. “In the slave quarters. ¶ The two-hour interval given for dinner, out of their working day from six till six.” Still from Griffith, dir., *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

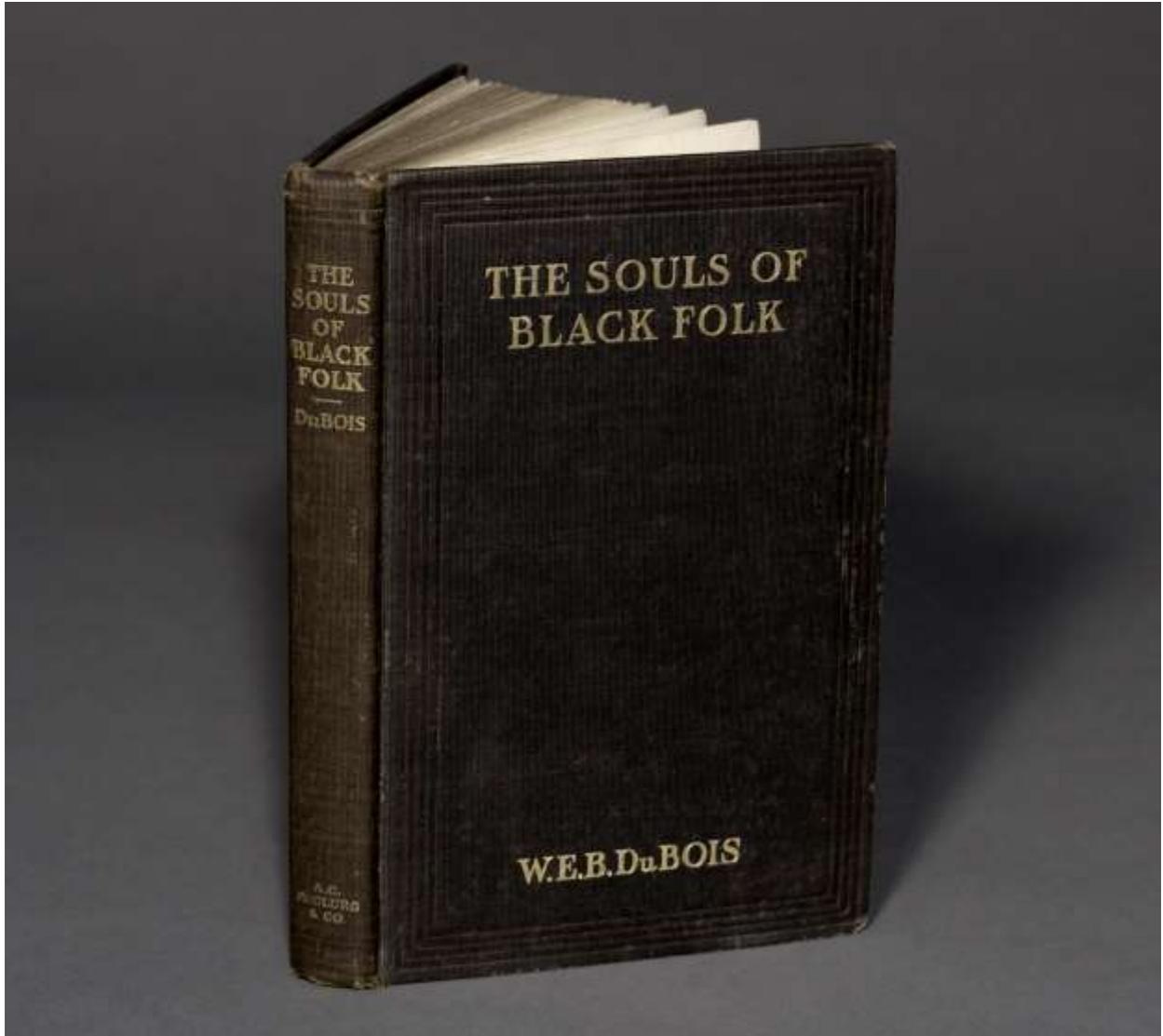


Figure 2.1. Cover of W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903). Photo: Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.



**The Souls of
Black Folk**

By W. E. B. DuBois

A REMARKABLE BOOK that is provoking much discussion because of the wonderful eloquence with which the author pleads for right and justice to his people. In these days of increasing agitation over the "negro problem" this passionate human document can neither be overlooked nor ignored. Aside from its remarkable presentation of facts it holds the reader—prejudiced or not—by its fascination of style and overpowering pathos.

Some of the Chapter Headings follow:

OF OUR SPIRITUAL STRIVINGS.
OF THE DAWN OF FREEDOM.
OF MR. WASHINGTON AND OTHERS.
OF THE MEANING OF PROGRESS.
OF THE TRAINING OF BLACK MEN.
OF THE BLACK BELT.
OF THE SONS OF MASTER AND MAN.
OF THE FAITH OF THE FATHERS.
OF THE PASSING OF THE FIRST-BORN.
OF ALEXANDER CRUMMELL.
OF THE COMING OF JOHN.
OF THE SONJOW SONGS.

3d Edition \$1.20 net Published by
A. C. McClurg & Co., Chicago

Figure 2.2. Advertisement for "The Souls of Black Folk," in the Philadelphia *Friends' Intelligencer* (29 Aug 1903), 560. The same advertisement ran in Chicago's *Broad Ax* and Indianapolis's *Freeman*. Image captured from ProQuest (18 March 2008).

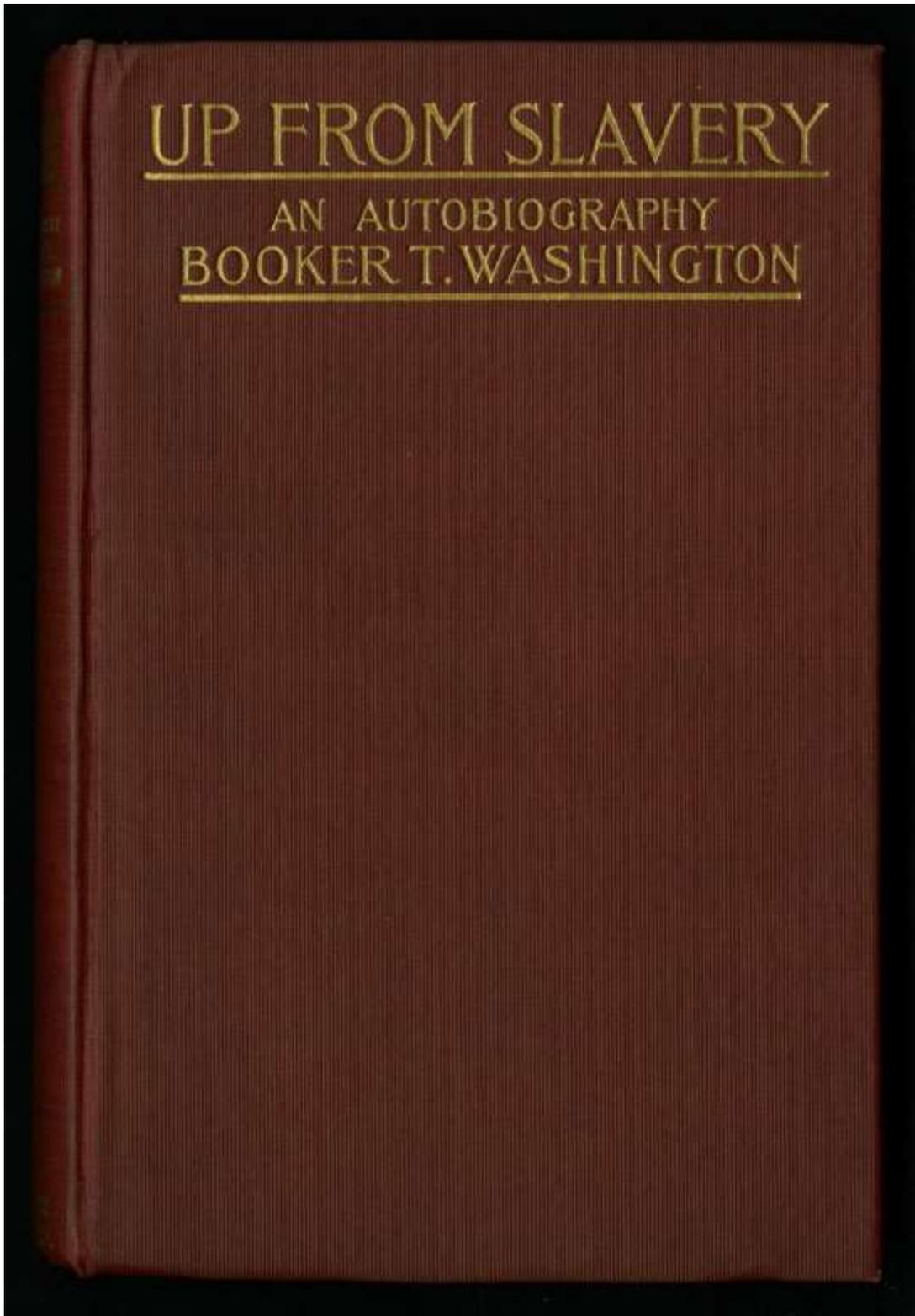


Figure 2.3. Cover of Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: an Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1901). Photo: Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

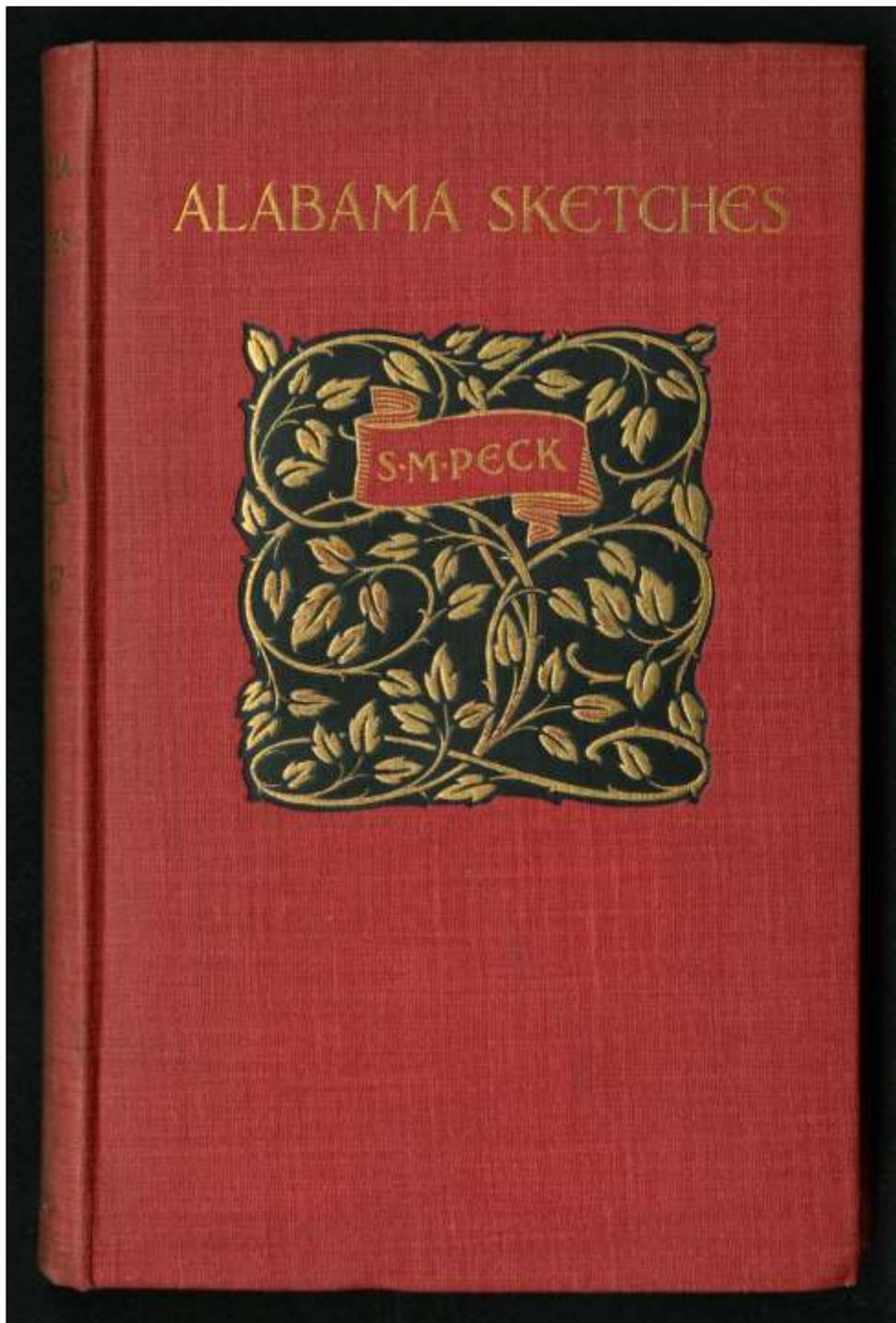


Figure 2.4. Cover of S. M. Peck, *Alabama Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co, 1902). Photo: Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.



Figure 2.5. J.E. Purdy, “W. E. Burghardt DuBois: Educator” (Boston: Westmoreland Co., c. 1904); affixed in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), frontispiece. Photo: Special Collections Research Center, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

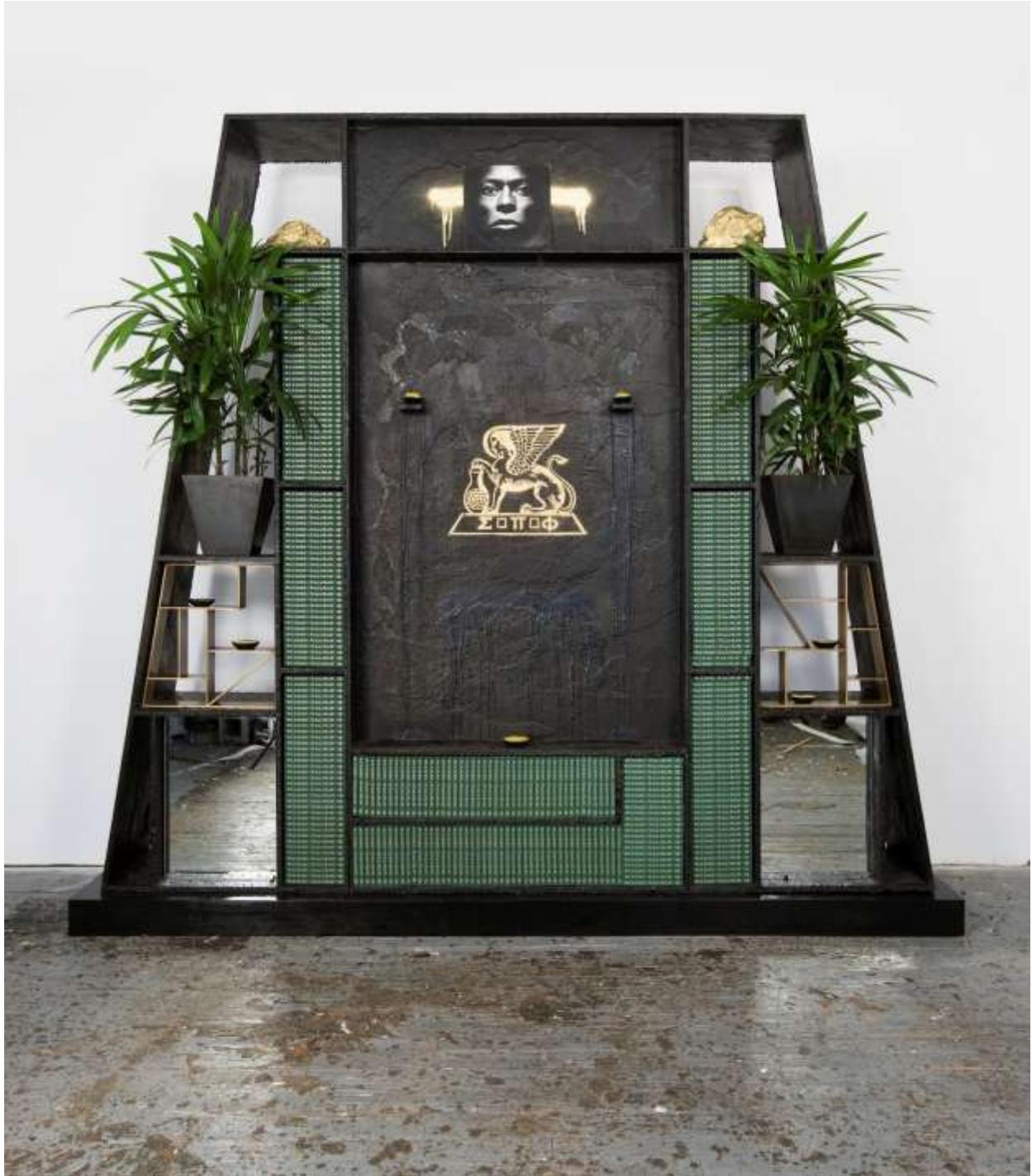


Figure 2.6. Rashid Johnson, *Souls of Black Folk* (2010), black soap, wax, books, vinyl, brass, shea butter, plants, space rocks, mirrors, gold paint, stained wood. 114 x 124.75 x 24.125 inches (289.56 x 316.865 x 61.278 cm). Photography: Farzad Owrang. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.



Figure 3.1. To Miss Lizzie Fritchie, 23 Nov. 1910; The Shenandoah, Richmond, Va., with Lee Monument (n.p., n.d.), Postcards, Graphic Arts Collection, American Antiquarian Society.



Figure 3.2. Unknown illustrator, "Working as All Negroes Do," in Ralph, *Dixie*, 119



Figure 3.3. Unknown photographer, "Buzzards at the Market," in Ralph, *Dixie*, 271



Figure 3.4. Thomas Dart Walker, “Easy-Going Negroes at the Market Space,” in Ralph, *Dixie*, 339



Figure 3.5. L. W. Hitchcock, "Planting Rice on a Carolina Plantation," in Ralph, *Dixie*, 275

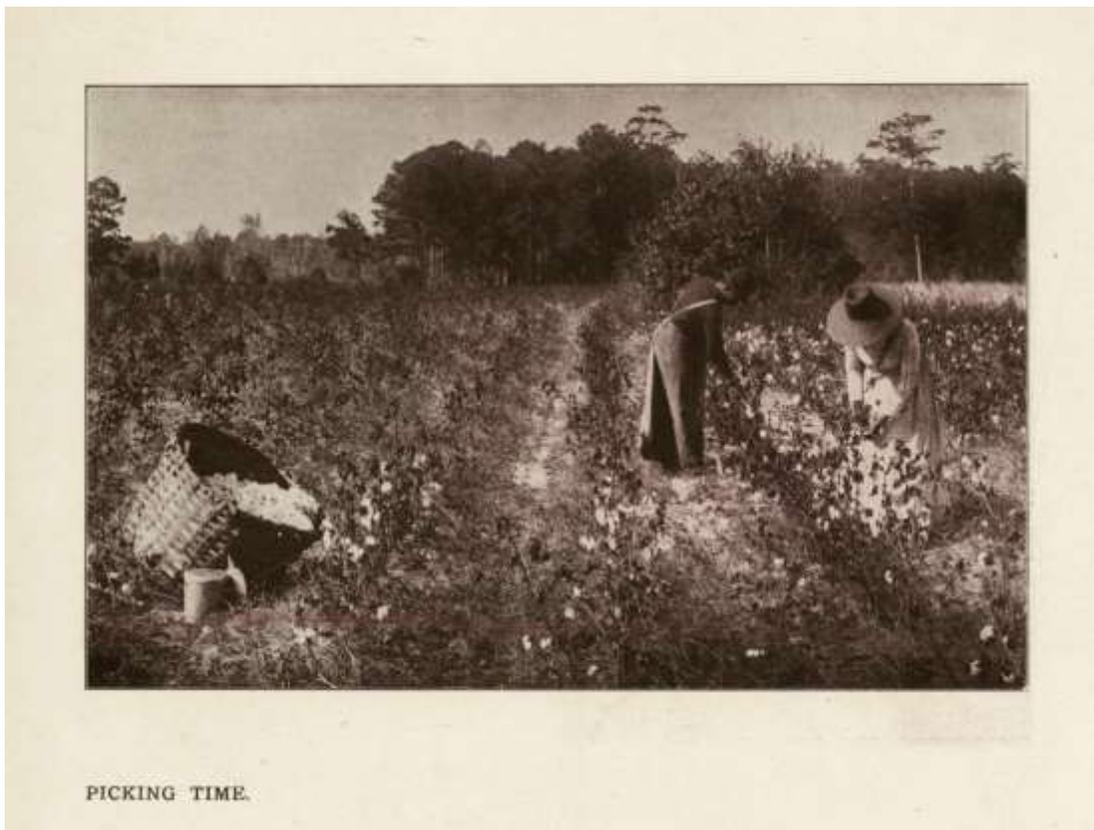
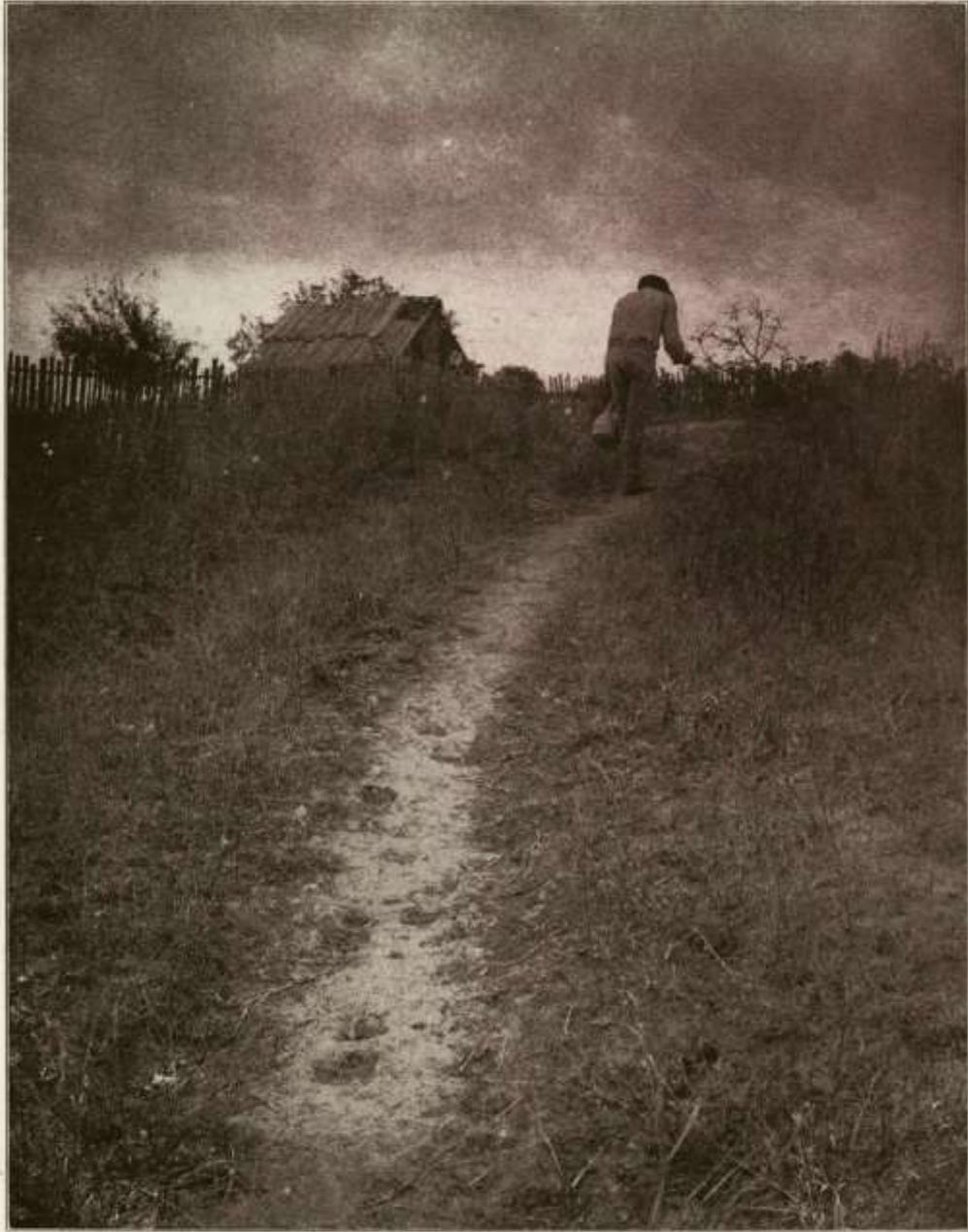


Figure 3.6. Rudolf Eickemeyer, "Picking Time," in *Down South*



THE DAY'S WORK DONE.

Figure 3.7. Eickemeyer, "The Day's Work Done," in *Down South*.



Figure 3.8. Eickemeyer, "Gabe," in *Down South*.



CURIOSITY.

Figure 3.9. Eickemeyer, "Curiosity," in *Down South*.



Figure 3.10. Eickemeyer, "Vanity," in *Down South*.



Figure 3.11. Allan G. Cram, "A Magnificent Avenue of Live Oaks," in Mildred Cram, *Old Seaport Towns of the South* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1917), facing page 148.



Figure 3.12. "Roses in full bloom..." C. D. W. to Mrs. C. C. Hurston (New York, NY), 2 April 1914, in Randolph Linsly Simpson Collection, James Weldon Johnson Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

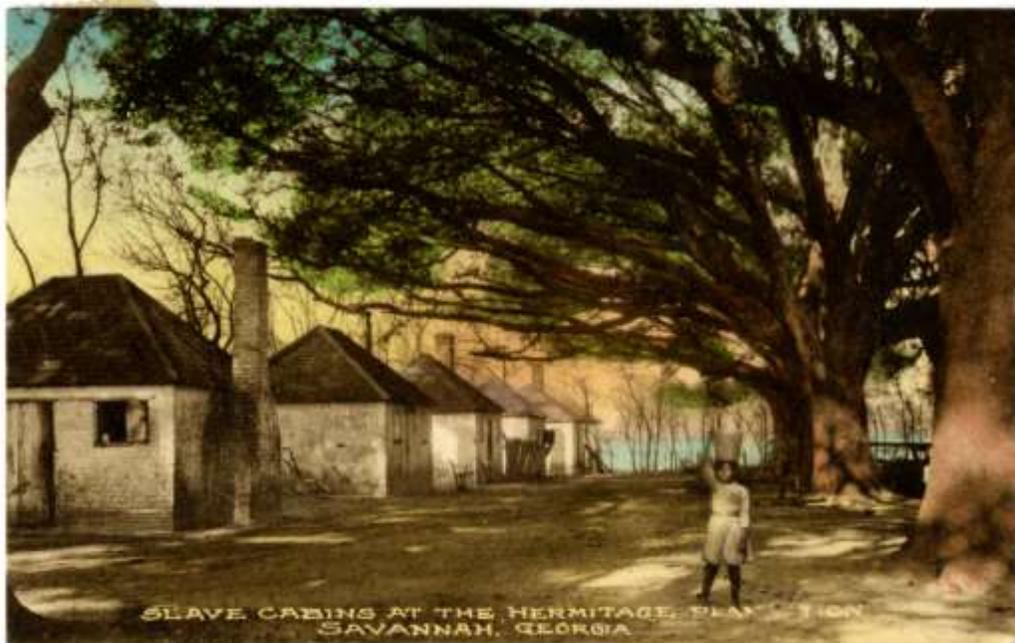


Figure 3.13. “Having a nice trip....” Margaret to Mrs. Arthur de Laugis, Harvard, Mass., Jan. 27, 1930. “Slave Cabins at the Hermitage, Savannah, Ga.” (Brooklyn, NY: The Albertype Co., c. 1910). American Antiquarian Society.



Figure 3.14. “Having a lovely time....” S. G. Howard to Mrs. Annie S. Head (Brookline, Mass.), 16 Jan. 191?, Post-AAS.



Figure 4.1. Alabama Coon Jigger, manufactured by German toymaker Lehmann (1912). The German version of this toy claims patents owned by Ferdinand Strauss Corporation, New York, dating from 1903 to 1912. Source: icollector.com



Figure 4.2. "Christmas 1902," Folder 547, in Randolph Linsly Simpson African American Collection, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



Figure 4.3. Eastman Johnson, *Christmas Time, The Blodgett Family* (1864). Oil on canvas, 30x25". Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Whitney Blodgett, 1983. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1983.486). Image available by the Open Access Scholarly Content of the Met: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/11258>.

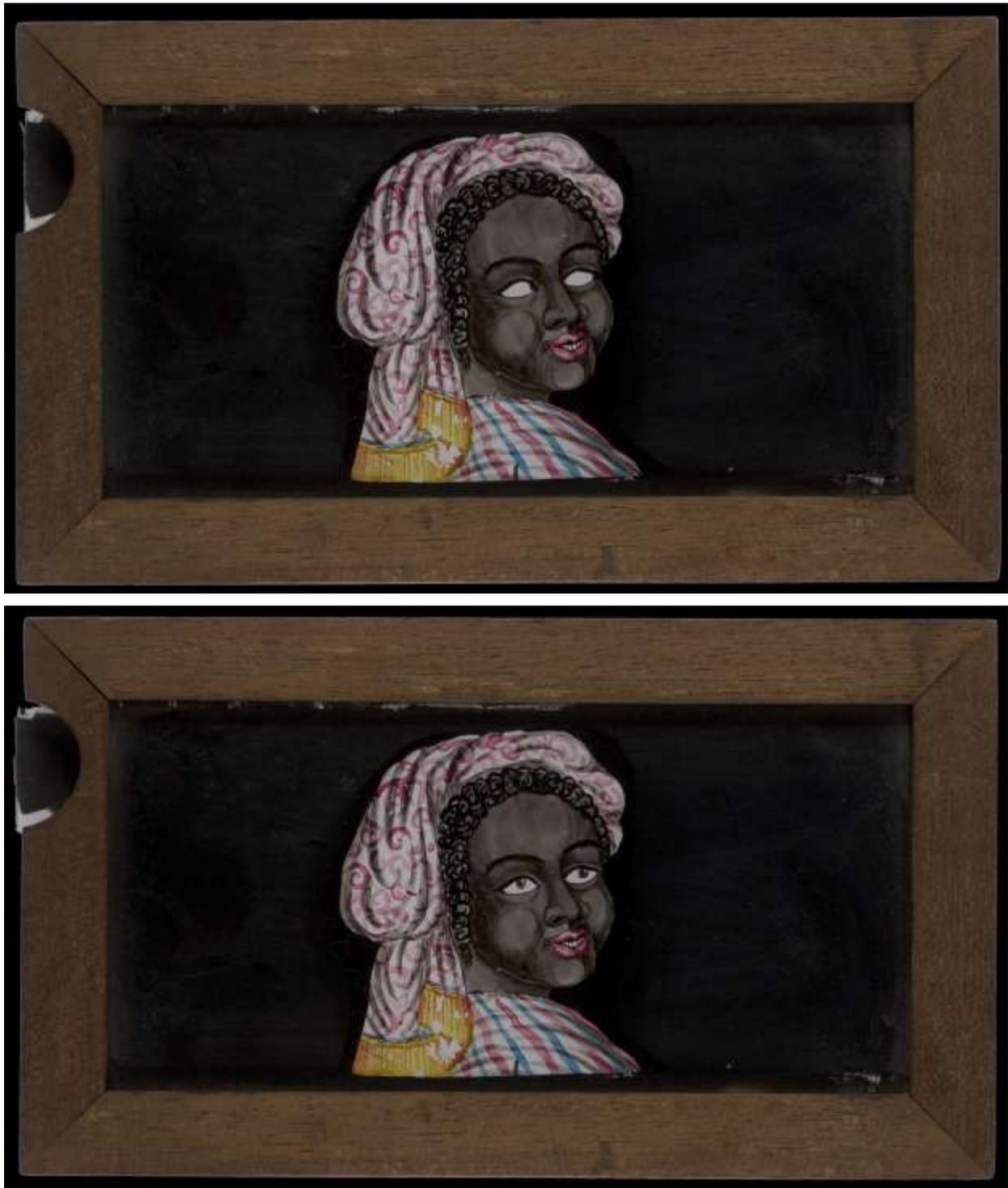


Figure 4.4. Magic lantern slide-painting of “Topsy” with shifting eyes (c. 1888?), in Folder 1192, Randolph Linsly Simpson African American Collection, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

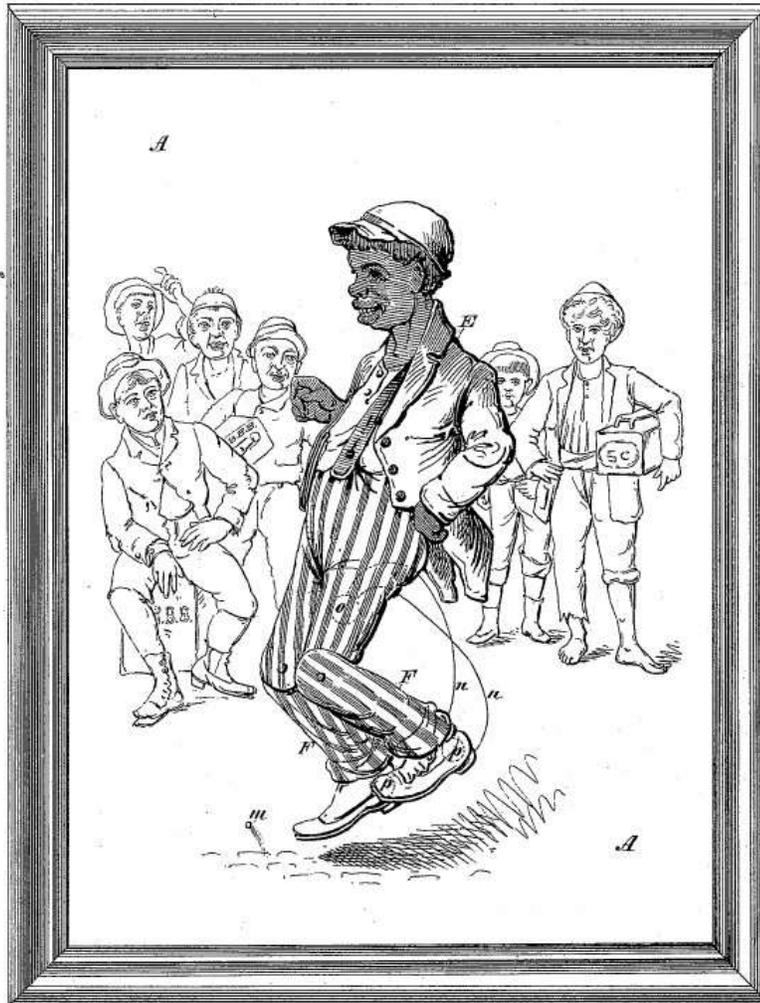
(No Model.)

2 Sheets—Sheet 1.

W. D. CHASE.
MECHANICAL TOY.

No. 400,055.

Patented Mar. 26, 1889.



WITNESSES:
Gustav Kretsch
J. F. Bourne,

Fig. 1.

INVENTOR:
William D. Chase
BY *Brown, Stead & Fenwick*
ATTORNEYS.

H. PETER, Photo-Lithographer, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4.5. William D. Chase, "Mechanical Toy," U.S. Patent 400,055 (March 26, 1889), 1.

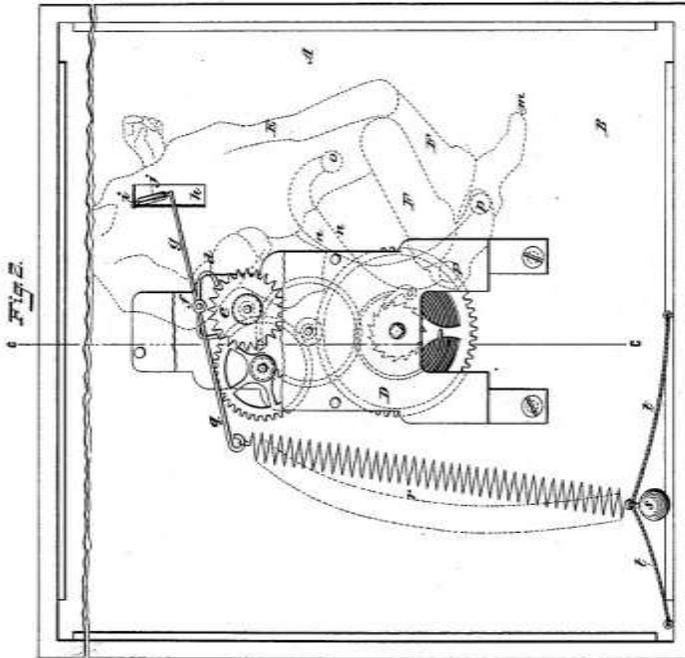
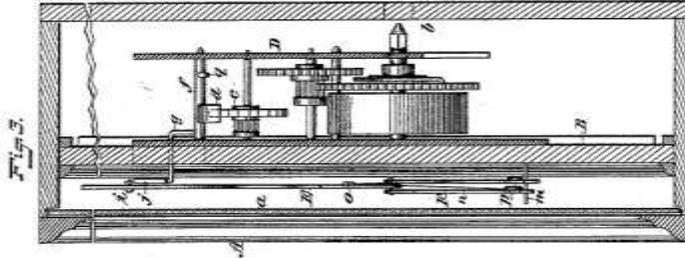
(No Model.)

2 Sheets—Sheet 2.

W. D. CHASE.
MECHANICAL TOY.

No. 400,055.

Patented Mar. 26, 1889.



WITNESSES:
Gustave Dierckx
J. F. Bourne

INVENTOR,
William D. Chase
BY *Boies, Stead & Frank*
ATTORNEYS.

A. PETER, Patent-Printer, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4.6. Chase, "Mechanical Toy," 2.

W. S. HENDREN.
TOY.
APPLICATION FILED FEB. 4, 1910.

959,009.

Patented May 24, 1910

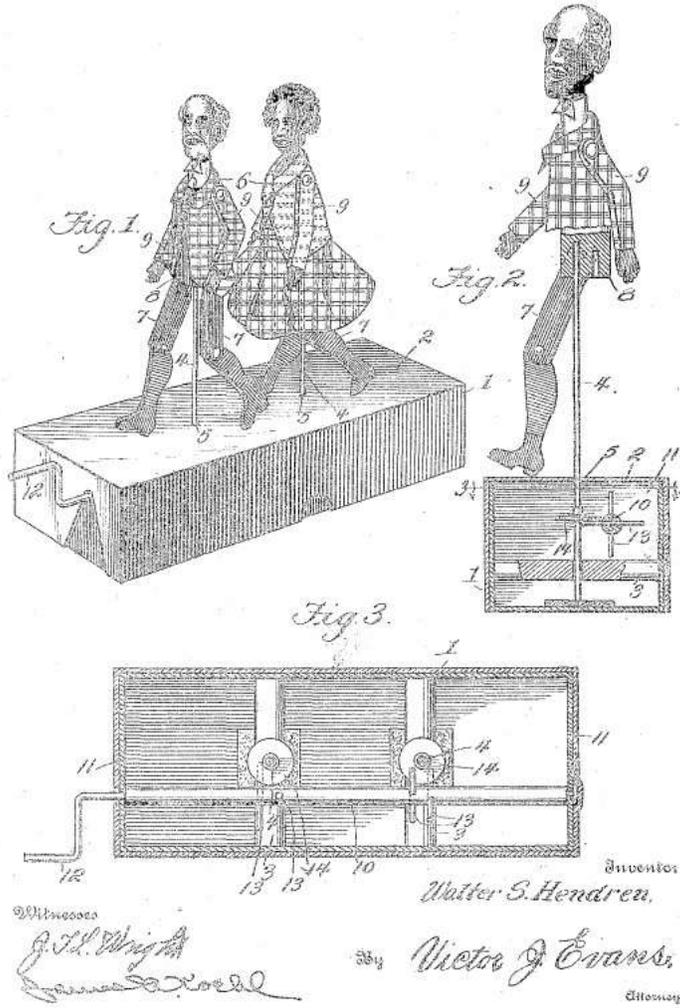


Figure 4.7. W. S. Hendren, "Toy," U.S. Patent 959,009 (May 24, 1910), 1



Figure 4.8. A. C. Gilbert Co., “Over the Top for 1918,” in *Playthings* 16 (April 1918), 44-45

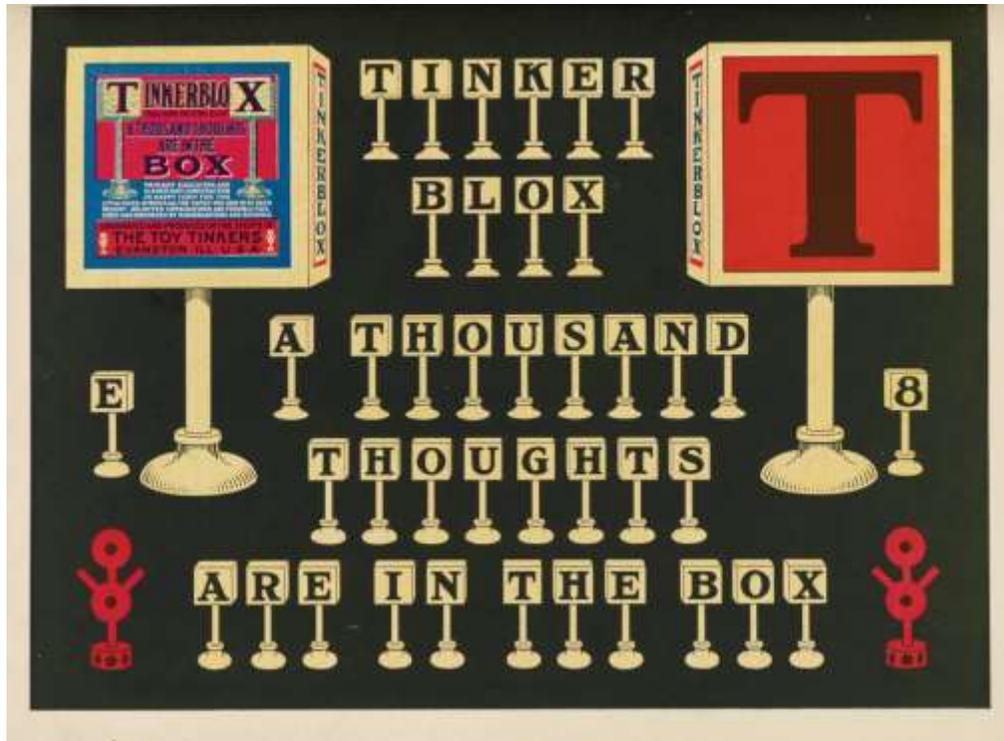


Figure 4.9. Tinker Toy Co., “A Thousand Thoughts Are in the Box,” *Playthings* 16 (July 1918), 17. Advertisement for the Alabama Coon Jigger on facing page.

STRAUSS MECHANICAL TOYS

THE
BIGGEST
SELLING
MECHANICAL
TOYS
IN
THE WORLD

Descriptive
Matter
of
Our
Other
MECHANICAL
TOYS
Sent
Free
on
Request



ALABAMA COON JIGGER
CLIMBING MONKEY
DANCING SAILOR
PRIZE FIGHTERS
MECHANICAL ARMORED CAR
UNO CLOWN
TOM TWIST
SEE-SAW
RING-A-ROSY
TIP TOP PORTER
ROLY-POLY
KAN-U-KATCH
AMERICAN HUNTER

Made Only
by

**FERDINAND
STRAUSS**

Inc.

7 W. 22d S
NEW YORK
U. S. A.

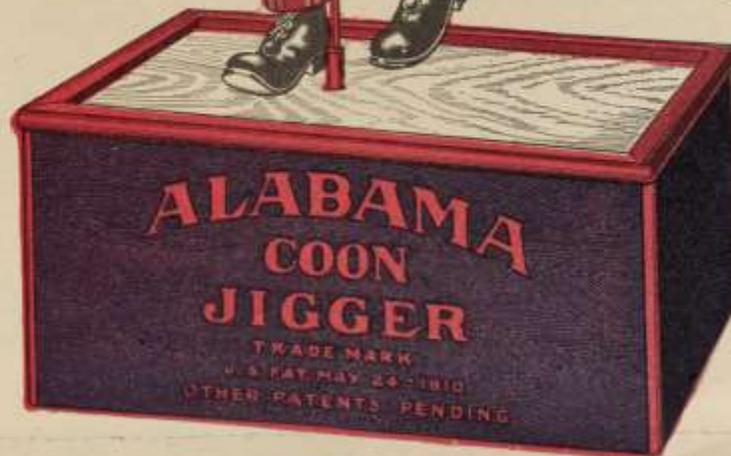


Figure 4.10. Ferdinand Strauss Co., "Alabama Coon Jigger," *Playthings* 16 (April 1918), 43.

**Strauss
Mechanical
Toys**

ILLUSTRATED AND
DESCRIPTIVE CATA-
LOG telling all about the
new things we manufacture in
Mechanical Toys, Tin Horns,
Stoves, Kitchens, Sets, Tea
Sets, etc., will be sent upon
request.

Quality
Big Values
Quick Sales

**The
Biggest
Selling
Mechanical
Toys
in the
World**

TOMBO

**“The
Alabama
Coon
Jigger”**

Figs like a real “Coon.” Extremely
amusing and comical. Simply re-
lease the lever and the “Coon” starts
an old-fashioned plantation break-
down.

The Alabama Coon Jigger stands
upon a richly decorated platform in
which there is concealed a unique
set of works. It represents wonder-
ful value and is especially well made,
beautifully decorated, and conven-
iently packed in knockdown form
—one in a box 7½ inches long, 5½
inches wide and 2 inches deep.

A patent ring lever on the side of
the box stops or starts the mech-
anism at will.

Actual size,
10½ inches high.

TOMBO
TRADE
MARK
ALABAMA
COON JIGGER
ESTABLISHED STRAUSS & CO. NEW YORK, N.Y.
U.S. PATENT—MAY 27, 1910—OCT. 12, 1910

TRIKAUTO
TRADE MARK (Pronounce Trick Auto)
“THE MECHANICAL WONDER”

This Trikauto is entirely new and does a great many tricks while traveling in the
immense delight of children and grown-ups alike. It runs forward, backward, side-
ways, in a whirl, in fact, literally in every direction. Made of lustrously decorated
metal and is mechanically perfect. Size: 7½ inches high, 3½ inches wide and 4 inches
long.
No. 33—Packed one in a box.

Factory
East Rutherford, N. J.
U. S. A.

**Ferdinand
Strauss
Inc.**

Office and Salesrooms
7 West 22nd St.
New York

1920

Figure 4.11. Ferdinand Strauss Co., “Tombo, ‘the Alabama Coon Jigger,’” and “Trikauto” (1920). Source: <http://www.ebay.com/itm/1920-HISTORICAL-DANCING-BLACK-AMERICANA-TOMBO-ALABAMA-JIGGER-STRAUSS-CO-TOY-/301091355610> (accessed 16 Feb. 2014).



Figure 4.12. Arthur Vitols, Byron Company (New York, NY), “Peggy O’Neill[sic]” (ca. 1920). Gelatin silver print, 10” x 8”. Museum of the City of New York (93.1.3.327). Photo courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.

Tombo is at O’Neil’s left knee, between two baby dolls.



Figure 4.13. Man Ray, "Automaton" (1917), in *Aventure 3* (January 1922), p. 17. Source: Digital Dada Library, University of Iowa.