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A Raucous Entertainment: Melodrama, Race, and the Search for Moral Legibility in Nineteenth-Century America

Abstract

Gathering together episodes from American theater history, my dissertation focuses on the destabilizing identities and paradoxical resolutions of so-called "Indian" and slavery plays to address nineteenth-century melodrama's fundamental engagement with race. Melodrama is a spectacular form that uses iconic images to move audiences to feel powerful emotions and to assign moral legibility to societal problems. Given the significant role of territorial expansion and chattel slavery in US history, race has always presented Americans with crucial moral dilemmas. Melodrama has long provided a dominant mode of representation for addressing such dilemmas that hinges upon racially inflected conceptions of good and evil. Yet melodrama's search for moral legibility depends upon contentious performance rituals that make this search far more complex than it is generally conceived to be. I argue that its paradoxical resolutions provide a ritualized framework for the staging of contested identities and ideologies during the period of America's national formation. My view of melodrama accounts for the interactive and raucous nature of nineteenth-century performance culture. It also incorporates the contributions of Native Americans and African Americans, which deserve more attention in studies of antebellum melodrama. I argue that melodrama has its origins in a colonial history - fraught with genocidal wars against indigenous peoples and the theft of African persons for slave labor - that shapes America's socio-political structures throughout much of the nineteenth century. My account of melodrama's rise throws into sharp relief how central the moral dilemmas posed by racial conflict have been to this influential American form since its beginnings. Placing Indian and slavery plays alongside one another, including *Metamora* (1829), *Nick of the Woods* (1838), *The Forest Princess* (1848), *The Escape* (1858), *The Stars and Stripes* (1848), and *The Octoroon* (1859), I emphasize the important points of connection between their representations of racialized victimization and vilification. Melodrama still influences the way we think and talk about race in America, and a look at our contemporary cultural moment shows that melodrama's paradoxical search for moral legibility continues to unfold.

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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Sarah M. Olivier

June 2017

Advisor: Clark Davis, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

A Raucous Entertainment

On 18 November 2016, Vice President-elect Mike Pence went to the Richard Rodgers Theatre in New York City to see a performance of the melodrama *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015). His presence provoked raucous outcries from the crowd throughout the performance, and the cast addressed him from the stage following the show. Upon entering the theater to take a prominent seat in the orchestra section, Pence was greeted with a loud outpouring of boos and hisses but also some supportive cheers. The crowd continued to make their sentiments known as the production's popular musical numbers unfolded because, evidently, they perceived strong connections between the story of America's revolutionary founding as a nation and the current political scene.

While King George III (Rory O'Malley) cautioned a foundling America on the struggles of self-rule, singing lines like "Do you know how hard it is to lead?" and "When your people say they hate you / Don't come crawling back to me," audience members cheered, yelled, and pointed at Pence, forcing O'Malley and the band to pause the song several times. When Alexander Hamilton (Javier Muñoz) and the Marquis de Lafayette (Seth Stewart) commented on their participation in the Revolutionary War with

the famous line “Immigrants: we get the job done!” an impromptu standing ovation halted the performance. The creator of *Hamilton*, Lin-Manuel Miranda, the director, Thomas Kail, and the lead producer, Jeffrey Seller, along with input from the cast members, composed a statement for the actors to read to Pence following the show. As actors in eighteenth-century costume and crewmembers in jeans and t-shirts linked arms across the stage, Brandon Victor Dixon, who plays Aaron Burr, read aloud:

We, sir—*we*—are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights [interrupted by cheers]. We truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us—*all of us* [gesturing to the house, cheers]. Again, we truly thank you for sharing this show, this wonderful American story told by a diverse group of men and women of different colors, creeds, and orientations.¹

As one of the most diverse casts in Broadway history, the actors of *Hamilton* thus positioned themselves as the embodiment of the nation’s sovereign people.

And so on this historical night the Rodgers became the site of a performative commons, a site where individuals of different stations gather to share in a ritual of contention and agreement, generating shared meanings through participatory forms, while also performing themselves as a people through self-representation.² Such a performance took place *at* the theater but was not contained *by* the theater. A social media storm brewed in which Americans on all sides of the political spectrum made use of the nascent virtual commons to debate not only the treatment Pence received but also the role of the theater in America. Even President-elect Donald Trump was drawn into the frenzy, saying on Twitter that Pence had been “harassed” and that “The Theater must always be a safe and special place.” Pence himself provided an alternative perspective,

commenting on the televised news that he “was not offended” and that the reactions of the crowd and cast were “what freedom sounds like” (*Fox News*). Amidst a socio-political climate fraught with conflicted tension, America’s theater has risen once again to provide a venue for contested enactments of American identities and ideologies. The fact that such a contested performance encompassing artists, politicians, and citizens of various ethnicities and genders took place within the frame of melodrama should not be surprising. Melodrama has long provided America with a dominant mode of representation that allows for disagreement and contradiction in its embodied types and symbols, even as it seeks to establish a seeming consensus on moral legibility in relation to the events and issues threatening to tear apart the social fabric of the nation. It is a ritual as old as America itself.

While the theater perhaps always has been a “special” place in America, it certainly has not always been “safe.” What happened that night at the Rodgers when Pence attended has precedents in American theater history. In the nineteenth century, theatergoers from all walks of life entered the public domain not only to be entertained as spectators of the drama but also to represent themselves through performative action. Professional theaters and amateur troupes were in existence throughout metropolitan cities, rural towns, and frontier outposts. Audiences were comprised of a diverse mix of social classes, races, and genders, so that compared to other public venues the theater perhaps came closest to bringing together a representative sampling of the surrounding area’s population. Although auditoriums were divided into pits, galleries, and balconies, American theaters facilitated audience mingling as all ticketholders entered through the same entrance, the balcony was open instead of separated into boxes, and there were no

firm barriers between sections. Gallery tickets were the cheapest and many places in the South segregated black attendees to this section, but this was also known as a place to get rowdy as those in the gallery could hassle actors and throw objects at the stage and orchestra. Because of this, the gallery drew people of various social stations.³ African Americans (including slaves), Native Americans, and Euro-Americans were all present at the theater, despite the objections this sometimes occasioned.⁴ The house lights stayed on throughout productions and the architectural designs of the balconies, galleries, and pits put the audience on display just as much as the stage.

Crowds crunched on peanuts, spit tobacco, shuffled around, and talked through performances. They cheered, they hissed, they threw objects, they requested songs of the orchestra, and they demanded curtain calls and encores; in short, they made their presence and their sentiments known. President Andrew Jackson and the Sauk leader Black Hawk (a prisoner-of-war at the time) caused a raucous stir (and boosted ticket sales) when they ended up attending the theater on the same night while the violent conflicts on the western frontier, resulting from the administration's removal policies, were unfolding. Sometimes theatergoers interjected themselves into the performance outright, such as when three hundred spectators climbed on stage during a production of *Richard III* to assist the actors in slaying the tyrannical king or when a cohort of Native Americans from the Creek nation took over a performance of *Pizzaro* to stage a ritual ceremony involving mock scalping, causing several of the actors to run and lock themselves in their dressing rooms. Riots were not an unusual occurrence. White resentment over the first successful black theater in New York City, the African Grove, led to a number of riots that resulted in the police shutting down the establishment. Most

infamously, the rivalry between the British Shakespearean actor William Charles Macready and the celebrity American actor Edwin Forrest occasioned the Astor Place Riot, which left over twenty people dead when militiamen opened fire on the unruly crowd.

The nineteenth-century American theater was home to such interactive performances, in part, because its architectural design and privileging of spectacle provided a fitting venue for the rituals of community formation. The typical antebellum theater had a minimal proscenium, a flat auditorium floor with a cantilevered balcony that prevented any obstructions to viewing, and a stage that thrust out into the crowd and then sloped upwards as it receded away from the seats. This design created the effect of a stage that tilted towards the audience, pushing the actors and set pieces into the auditorium, so that it encompassed theatergoers in the action. Accordingly, special effects were of paramount importance and enhanced the sense that the audience was part of the exciting world on display. Sophisticated scene changes and depth effects were created through intricate groove systems on the stage floor. Trap doors, thunder boxes, movable pools, and explosive devices made possible miraculous disappearances and reappearances, storm simulations, cascading waterfalls, and dazzling fires of real flame. Large casts of extras were used to stage expansive battle scenes in which muskets were discharged, live animals (horses and elephants, for example) were often used in performances, and set pieces featured actual train cars and ships.⁵ Ingenious technological innovation made these special effects truly astonishing, perhaps only imaginable in comparison to today's blockbuster films. It is no wonder that audiences

responded viscerally to such sensational performances and, in their exhilaration, were sometimes moved to join the action.

With the theater serving as a site for the performative commons, nineteenth-century plays often encompassed complex, and potentially explosive, enactments that go well beyond the purview of their scripts. Acknowledging this fact is crucial to understanding melodrama as the dominant form of theatrical entertainment in nineteenth-century America. As a spectacular and sentimentalized form that uses iconic images to move audiences to feel powerful sensations, melodrama is well suited to expressing the loaded signifiers tied to civil unrest in the American social consciousness. In the period of national formation, such unrest often had to do with the moral conflicts sparked by a burgeoning global market economy that depended upon territorial expansion and slave labor. As a result, melodrama's symbolic field gravitated towards social constructions of race with all the contradictions and points of pressure that they induced in people's lives. In the same way that *Hamilton's* domain of representation extends well beyond its libretto into the realms of socio-political debate enacted by individuals inside and outside the theater, so nineteenth-century melodramas lived at the intersection of embodied performances rather than in the dead letters of their scripts. Bringing to life the raucous performance culture of the nineteenth century through a fresh gathering of related episodes in theater history, my dissertation provides a nuanced take on the network of significations that proliferated through the Indian and slavery melodramas so abundant on the American stage.

The Search for Moral Legibility

As a dominant cultural form that far outstripped printed materials in its circulation, melodrama was *the* mass medium of nineteenth-century America. A glimpse at one play's stage run is indicative of the fact that melodrama dwarfed the distributive reach of novels, despite the extent to which the latter has long been considered as the most important genre in the development of American literature. The Bowery Theater in New York City, home to a nationalistic brand of melodramatic entertainment, held approximately three thousand people in its auditorium (Bank, *Theatre Culture* 13). One of its successful melodramas, *Nick of the Woods* (1838), played there consistently for fifty years and was performed at other theaters in every region of the country, meaning that hundreds of thousands of theatergoers experienced it firsthand. In comparison, the typical print run for a novel was roughly two to four thousand (Mullen, "Making an Exception" 37).⁶ Melodrama also exerted great influence on other cultural forms, ranging from fiction to political oratory to religious revivalism to the visual arts. The ubiquity of melodrama is connected to the fact that it provided Americans with a secularized ritual of mythic import during the period of its national formation. In mythologizing the explosive, polarizing, and guilt-ridden issues that threaten national unity, such as genocidal war and chattel slavery, melodrama imbues them with moral significance and expresses their overwhelming emotional effects through the non-verbal signs of embodiment. On the surface, this search for moral legibility simplifies societal problems, but the actual performative intricacies of melodrama's raucous entertainment reveal far more complex networks of signification.⁷

Melodrama's mythic worldview, which is rooted in a clear sense of good and evil, offers embodied performances that signify right and wrong through suffering victimry and sinister villainy. In establishing such moral valences, melodrama stages highly exaggerated, non-verbal, bodily gestures that express truths beyond language's signifying capacity in scenes based on elaborate coincidences, heightened emotions, and over-the-top physical actions played out by moustache-twirling villains, plucky heroes, and persecuted heroines. As Linda Williams asserts:

If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately concerned with a retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering, then the operative mode is melodrama. (15)

The melodramatic mode, accordingly, adheres to several key elements clarified by Williams: it focuses on victim heroes and the recognition of their virtue through suffering; it presents such characters in Manichean terms; it is structured on an alternation between scenes of pathos and action; and it engages with societal issues but often resolves them on an individual level. In so doing, melodrama tends to register villainy as masculine and virtue as feminine.

In its attempts to make moral sense of socio-political issues, melodrama maps particular meanings onto American identities and relations. As Jane Tompkins asserts in regards to sentimental fiction, these works are "agents of cultural formation . . . bearers of a set of national, social, [and] economic . . . interests" with "designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way" (xi-xii).

Melodrama as a theatrical form, however, requires the participation of the audience in the construction of such designs. "To study performance is not to study completed forms" but

to “become aware of performance as itself a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted,” as Elin Diamond stresses (4). Theater, as Bruce M. McConachie emphasizes, is constituted by the “patterned interactions” between actors and audiences and is therefore a “relatively autonomous cultural practice” that interacts with “politics, economics, and a multiplicity of other practices to energize and channel the flow of history” (McConachie 230). Melodrama of the early national period offers paradoxical resolutions of the societal issues with which it engages that can be considered as instances of such “patterned interactions,” illuminating its cultural function of generating communal meaning through contested moral legibility.

Melodrama is often dismissed as a simplified, conservative, and naive form that pulls on the heartstrings, indulges in aesthetic excess, and assuages guilt with its neat and tidy resolutions. Such a view denies the actual complexity of theatrical performance, however, which was a highly participatory and raucous affair in nineteenth-century America. In the acting out of melodramatic scripts, what appear to be static (or simple) types take on shifting meanings that generate contested interpretations, particularly regarding morality. What I describe as melodrama’s search for moral legibility involves this complex process of generating shared meaning through communal action and performative representation. The central paradox of melodrama, for which various critics have disparaged the form, is that it upholds ideals of virtue against malignant forces under the conviction that a larger, cosmic order will prevail, while ignoring the fact that such an order is a reflection of current social structures. David Grimstead emphasizes the tendency towards paradox in melodrama and argues that it reveals a “latent reservation” regarding melodrama’s ostensible faith in historical progress, which results in pure

contradiction (224). These paradoxical moral resolutions, however, are anything but the latent fears of playwrights who do not quite know what they are doing. I argue that they exert such a formative influence over the construction of the narratives that they can be taken as purposeful methods. My dissertation accordingly illustrates that the paradoxical moral resolutions in American melodrama serve a specific cultural function.

The seemingly tidy endings of popular melodramas belie the fact that performance is never a completed form. As a mythic machine, melodrama's articulation of a cosmic order is structured around a belief in the ongoing battle between good and evil, which far from being resolved in any one scenario is destined to unfold in subsequent episodes. Each melodramatic performance, then, opens up possibilities that are temporarily foreclosed but never permanently erased by the denouement. Likewise, each performance calls for audience responses to the ways in which it stages virtue and villainy, responses that come to exist in reactive forms of suffering that are aligned with different identities and types in alternative performances. The search for moral legibility thus sustains its own continuation through potentially endless proliferation. My dissertation contributes a gathering together of plays and responses that can be seen as related proliferations of melodramatic performance that complement and contend with one another. Accounting for the diverse manifestations of Indian and slavery plays rather than taking one as a representative example (as critics sometimes do with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance), I paint a more complete picture of these race melodramas than much of the current criticism offers. This picture depends upon a deeper consideration of melodrama's paradoxical moral resolutions. I posit that these resolutions are temporary patches or faux solutions that constitute a reliable framework that enables the enactment

of destabilizing identities and contentious possibilities. Just because melodramas offered pat conclusions does not mean that nineteenth-century audiences naively accepted them or came to a full consensus on their moral messages. Instead, such conclusions contributed to a ritual of community formation that could be adapted to localized situations and therefore take on various meanings depending on the responsive performances of different actors and audiences. The search for moral legibility, I argue, should be seen as a series of culturally specific processes in action.

In order to illuminate such processes, my dissertation emphasizes the extent to which embodied performance is inherently rife with contradictory potentialities. Because of its performative nature, the moral legibility that melodrama seeks to provide is often equivocal. At the narrative (or mimetic) level, melodrama may assign certain moral meanings to destabilizing identities and situations, but whether or not those meanings are reinforced or contested through embodied (or ontic) performance is another question altogether. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon observes of the dramatic medium:

[T]he theatrical sign has the capacity to display and erase meanings simultaneously—to eclipse embodiment in favor of mimesis or to foreground embodiment in such a way as to challenge mimesis—which enables theatrical performance to express contradictions . . . with surprising agility. (52)

Certainly, it is often the case that melodramas complicate the moral legibility conveyed in their scripts through the nuances of the embodied (or ontic) register. For example, we will see in the chapters that follow an Indian character who is stereotypically drunk and unintelligible according to the scripted dialogue but who evinces virtuous passion and nuanced loyalties through the embodied gestures of pantomime. We will see an Indian princess played by a white woman in a red-faced performance that intimates a radical

break with the strictures of white middle-class gender roles. Also, we will see a black actor mock and morally condemn the degrading imitative performances of minstrelsy by playing a white master through masked satire. These examples show that melodrama often used the capacity of the theatrical sign to display and erase meanings as a way of articulating through non-verbal means, when words do not suffice, the complexities of race and gender as they come to bear on individual lives.

Language is always inadequate for expressing the moral truths that melodrama seeks to make legible precisely because those truthful meanings are overwhelming and uncontainable. Its patch or faux solutions point to this unbearable weight even as they signify the temporary closure of a performative ritual that participants can expect to be repeated with variation in the future. The paradox of moral (il)legibility derives from this contradiction, which is why taking melodramatic scripts at face value so erroneously simplifies this robust performance tradition. Providing a fresh take on melodrama's paradoxical resolutions and destabilizing identities, I analyze the figurations of race and gender that were used to create a participatory form of performance ritual. This ritual provided American players and theatergoers with a shared framework for practicing self-representation in the never-ending melodramatic search for moral legibility.

A Closer Look at Early American Melodrama

Foundational studies of melodrama provide clear definitions of the form, but the far-reaching impact of stage melodrama and its constructions of race in early America deserve further examination. Beginning in the late 1960s, scholars such as Eric Bentley, James L. Rosenberg, and Robert B. Heilman started to revalue and thus more carefully define melodrama, distinguishing it from tragedy and emphasizing its physical (non-

verbal) dramatization of heightened emotions. At the same time, Michael R. Booth, James L. Smith, and David Grimstead offered the first studies of melodrama on the stage. It was not until Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), however, that a comprehensive and foundational understanding of "the mode of excess" was formulated. After a lengthy examination of French stage melodrama as a dominant popular form in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Brooks moves on to show how novelists Balzac and Henry James utilize the rhetorical excesses and polarized moral forces of the melodramatic in their narratives. This method allows Brooks to demonstrate that "melodramatic" can be used as an adjective to describe an abiding *mode*—that is a means of expression that has a fictional system for making sense of experience "as a semantic field of force" reaching across genres—derived from the original creation of a popular theatrical kind, i.e. French stage melodrama (xiii-xvii). Brooks further demonstrates that the melodramatic mode "is vital to the modern imagination" (xv) in that it seeks to locate and to articulate the moral occult, "the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth," by staging the retrieval of virtue (5). Identifying the formal features of French stage melodrama, such as Manichean structures and the aesthetics of muteness (i.e. non-verbal sign systems), Brooks provides a clear understanding of this previously neglected mode of literature.

Arising in the late eighteenth century, melodrama staged conflicts between the cosmic forces of good and evil through the use of heightened emotions, non-verbal symbols, and the static character types of hero and villain. According to Brooks, *mélodrame*, literally meaning a play with music, originated on the Parisian stage during the French Revolution. At the time, only licensed theatres were allowed to put on plays with

dialogue, and so various *unlicensed* entertainment venues began to feature non-verbal productions combining dance, pantomime, and dumb show. Music was used to underscore meaning and intensify emotional responses (e.g., three sinister notes indicating the entrance of a villain); likewise, highly stylized gestures and facial expressions conveyed deep passions and corresponding moral states (e.g., the villain's arched eyebrows). In the wake of the revolution, the ban on speech in unlicensed venues was lifted and modern melodrama was born. Plays with a Manichean structure featuring scenes of exhilarating action and moving pathos acted out by virtuous and villainous types captured the public imagination.

Mark Victor Mullen criticizes Brooks for locating the origination of melodrama in such a historically specific context because earlier dramas, including those of ancient Greece and Renaissance England, contain melodramatic elements, while an exclusive focus on France obscures the ease with which melodrama crosses national borders (*Sympathetic Vibrations* 44). Mullen is correct, but Brooks's account of the rise of melodrama is still useful because it emphasizes the full development of melodrama as integrally connected to non-verbal means of expression, which were more common upon the stage during the ban on speech in certain European performance venues. In addition, Brooks's basic description of melodrama's features is quite accurate. While melodramatic tendencies can be traced back through the entire history of Western drama, it is in the late eighteenth to the early-nineteenth centuries that melodrama matures into a fully-fledged autonomous form in Europe and its (former) colonies, including the United States.

Early American melodrama bears the strain of socio-political conflict and transformation, and it enacts the questioning of traditional forms of authority, such as church and monarch. The fact that melodrama initially existed outside the public (verbal) signification systems, and that it had its *own* nascent signifying system, meant that it could convey themes and values not sanctioned by the institutional authorities. Intimating a democratic impulse, melodrama dignified ordinary people, the sons and daughters of peasants and merchants, in larger-than-life roles while condemning those who abuse power, namely male aristocrats. As it was in France, American melodrama was staged in theaters that were not under the jurisdiction of the state authorities. Through the Revolution, British soldiers and appointed officials ran most of the theaters, which staged plays popular in England, but when they left the country, local, uncensored theaters began to put on original American melodramas. Moving beyond aristocratic villains and peasant heroes, American melodramas featured distinctive cultural types, such as “noble savages,” Indian princesses, settler heroes, yeoman farmers, earnest Yankees, suffering slaves, and republican daughters.⁸ The nascent signifying system of melodrama was used to represent the cultural symbols and ideals of the new nation in ways that previous forms, such as tragedy with its focus on powerful ruling families and traditional sacred paradigms, could not. Masses of people, including the middle and lower classes, were drawn to the theatre to partake in this new and exciting form of dramatic expression. These early melodramas were vehicles for the dissemination, interpretation, and application of contested moral ideologies in a rapidly changing, secularizing, democratized society.

In Americanist scholarship, several histories of stage melodrama have opened the way for critical examinations of the cultural work performed by this genre (and subsequently mode). Grimstead details the rise of melodrama on the American stage in the first half of the nineteenth century, offering descriptions of the interactions between playwrights, theater managers, actors, critics, and audiences. In examining why such “severely limited plays” were so popular, Grimstead offers some explanations of how melodrama reflected the socio-economic changes of the antebellum period (128). Unfortunately, his negative assumptions about melodramatic aesthetics seem to result in the oversimplified view that melodrama’s cultural significance lies in its democratic appeal to the “lowest common denominator” of American society. Tice L. Miller provides a more complex view of American theater “as a crucible where advanced ideas . . . were put before the public,” historical narratives were shaped, and American values and identities were articulated and solidified (xv). Outside of his introduction, however, his text is devoted to cataloguing and summarizing important authors and plays of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rather than providing critical interpretations. The most sophisticated historiography of American stage melodrama is McConachie’s *Melodramatic Formations*, which builds upon the work of Grimstead to provide a concrete narrative of the theatrical changes in style, genre, and audience reception as elite paternalism and republicanism declined and bourgeois respectability and rationality grew in prominence. McConachie’s study illuminates the mutually influential relationship between socio-historical shifts and cultural performance.

A New Perspective on Melodrama's Origins

Granting their fundamental usefulness, these studies of American melodrama nevertheless neglect to account for its colonialist roots. Brooks asserts that the form grew out of the democratic impulses of the revolutionary period without addressing the fact that the revolutionary period itself was intimately connected with imperialist colonialism, as was especially the case with the American and Haitian revolutions. In her recent study of New World Drama from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Dillon traces the emergence of the “performative commons” as it developed in the circum-Atlantic spaces of the colonial system at the same time that forms of government rooted in popular sovereignty materialized. Looking at New World theater in such a context, she convincingly demonstrates the dynamism of colonial drama as a cultural form that is not derivative—as early American theater is often considered to be—but distinctive in the ways that it assigns meanings to the figures and types that are symbolic of the contradictions resulting from colonial structures. Underpinning these emergent performances is what Dillon calls “the colonial relation”:

Colonialism subtends and structures new dispensations of political freedom insofar as they depend on a shadow economy of dispossession, specifically, the dispossession of property (from Native Americans) and labor (from New World Africans) that fuels the property ownership regimes of metropolitan and creole Europeans. (8)

This approach throws into relief the ways in which theatrical representations of indigenous peoples, diasporic Africans, and European colonists multiplied throughout the circum-Atlantic rim during the colonial era. As colonies transformed into newly established nations, these representations were re-imagined in substitutional forms that

helped to create Americanized identities. Yet these substitutions or “surrogations,” as Joseph Roach calls them, continued to bear the strain of colonial relations.⁹

When considered within this context, it not surprising that the most pervasive performances of antebellum American melodrama were so-called “Indian” plays and slavery plays. As Dillon articulates, the colonial relation pivoted on the connection between the de-territorialization of indigenous peoples and the expropriation of African slave labor for plantation economies. Dillon’s work, however, does not take melodrama as its focus but rather looks at the entirety of theater culture in the colonial Atlantic world, mostly before the rise of melodrama. Using her articulation of the colonial relation, my account of melodrama’s origins explains how the form’s racialized identities stem from America’s history as a nation that formed out of New World colonies. Given that colonialism’s violence forced together western indigenous peoples, Africans, and Europeans, it makes sense that melodrama’s paradoxical search for moral legibility was preoccupied with race from the very beginning. Lying at the source of national guilt regarding this history, race and ethnicity have long presented a crucial moral dilemma for American culture. Early American melodrama positions white, red, and black bodies as hyper-loaded signifiers, gesturing towards contested moral assignments in ways that have exerted a fundamental impact on the persistent American tendency to see good and evil as racially inflected.

My perspective on melodrama’s colonial origins looks forward to the account of twentieth-century race melodrama provided by Williams. Looking at filmic, televised, and political events in mass entertainment, Williams likewise argues that “it is a peculiarly American form of melodrama in which virtue becomes inextricably linked to

forms of racial victimization and vilification” (44) because America “habitually sees a Manichean good and evil in the visual ‘fact’ of race itself” (xiv). Williams asserts problematically, however, that the melodramatic stereotypes of a racially constructed good and evil have their “inaugural moment” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (297). On the contrary, my dissertation demonstrates that these melodramatic types have their roots in the raucous theater culture of the early nineteenth century, a culture that is shaped by colonialism’s lasting impact on a newly independent America. Whereas Williams centers her discussion on melodramas of black and white, I use Dillon’s concept of the colonial relation to investigate the significant connections between early nineteenth-century Indian melodramas and mid-nineteenth-century slavery melodramas. My approach shows the extent to which the racialized virtue and villainy ingrained into American consciousness grew out of the influential relationship between contentious red and black figurations on the early American stage.

My dissertation offers a unique focus, then, on the growth of melodrama as a dominant mode of cultural performance that provided a system for assigning a contentious moral legibility to civil unrest as America’s democratic ideals of freedom and equality increasingly conflicted with its colonial relations, particularly in the forms of genocidal war and chattel slavery. In examining melodrama’s paradoxical search for moral legibility, it is important to consider the ways in which its representations of race intersect with those of gender since melodrama’s moral register is structurally tied to dominant ideologies of masculinity and femininity. Featuring resolute Indian princes, alluring Indian princesses, rebellious slave boys, and persecuted octoroon girls, typically played by white actors in red or blackface, stage melodramas provided a system of

meaning-making that allowed for the semblance of (faux) moral resolutions that could not actually be achieved without undoing the colonial relations sustaining the socio-economic order of early America. Native Americans and African Americans, of course, were involved in the melodramatic performance tradition of the nineteenth century. However, a historical record that privileges white playwrights and performers has occluded their visibility. Even Williams accedes to the notion of a “painfully belated assimilation of an African-American viewpoint” into melodrama during the civil rights movement of the twentieth century (299). Ethnic voices are, in fact, largely absent from scholarly accounts of nineteenth-century American melodrama (though certainly not from studies of American theater history as a whole). Paying attention to the ways in which indigenous and black writers, thinkers, performers, and audiences engaged with this dominant form of mass media, my dissertation also seeks to provide a more diverse (and accurate) account of the rise of the melodramatic tradition that includes such engagement.

A Glimpse of Things to Come

Part One of my dissertation begins with an account of the figural theater in colonial America. The colonists of the Virginia and Massachusetts Bay colonies often wrote about their New World settlements as stages propped up before the world’s spectators, dramatizing what they perceived as their special mission in creating a more perfect society. Within this context, they assigned roles to the indigenous inhabitants of North America that sought to “justify” colonial violence, representations that both shaped and were shaped by colonial relations. Histories of New World settlement, Puritan jeremiads, and captivity narratives provided key frameworks for interpreting the colonial

experience that subsequently exerted a lasting influence on the rise of melodrama (and the actual theater) in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. I argue that the Indian plays that were so popular on the antebellum American stage offer simulations of Indian identity that can be traced back to this colonial context even as they work to conceal such relations.

Chapter One details how the hugely popular and much discussed melodrama *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), written by John Augustus Stone and starring the populist actor Edwin Forrest, utilizes substitutions of Indian identity to provide a fraught moral legibility to the traumatic events of King Philip's War in a way that squares with the recent formation of America as a republican democracy. I also provide a reading of the Pequot author William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836) as a response to dominant representations of Metacomet (or King Philip), like the melodramatic *Metamora*, through a rhetoric of incongruity. While Apess's *Eulogy* has received substantial attention, it is not typically discussed in relation to melodrama.

Metamora is often taken as wholly representative of Indian drama, but the subsequent chapters in Part I paint a more complete picture of the melodramatic portrayals of Native Americans on the stage in their focus on two overlooked but important plays by women authors, Louisa Medina's 1838 *Nick of the Woods: A Drama in Three Acts* (Chapter Two) and Charlotte Barnes's 1848 *The Forest Princess; or, Two Centuries Ago* (Chapter Three). As a "blood and thunder" melodrama produced at New York City's Bowery Theatre, *Nick* is a prime example of melodrama's privileging of spectacle through sensationalized over-the-top action and innovative set design. Offering a rare full analysis of this influential play, I discuss Medina's expertise in melodramatic

convention to show how she orchestrates a ritualistic performance of frontier violence that evokes and then erases colonial hybridizations, including a bloodthirsty frontiersman and an indigenized white heroine, in a paradoxical attempt to read American history through the lens of moral legibility.

Next, I look at Barnes's *The Forest Princess* and how it intervenes in the Pocahontas legend being developed through popular melodramas of the period by providing a revisionist history of New World settlement in Virginia. Barnes centers Pocahontas as a matriarch with a benevolent vision of the racial interactions set into motion by imperial colonialism. My reading of this play is the first to consider it as a melodrama and also the first to place it alongside the indigenous account of the Virginia colony's history, thereby complicating Barnes's benevolent vision. Barnes starred as Pocahontas herself, and so I also break with the other two critics who have discussed the play to consider how the problematic move of "playing Indian" gave Barnes the freedom to act outside the strictures of nineteenth-century gender roles as they were proscribed for middle-class white women. Throughout Part One, I gather key instances of Native American performance at the theater to make visible the ways in which indigenous peoples created self-representations that contended with the melodramatic portrayals of the dominant culture.

Part Two begins with an overview of the connection between figurations of black identity in the colonial world of the Atlantic basin and the rise of (anti)slavery melodramas on the American stage of the 1850s. At the center of this configuration is the sensationalized suffering of the black slave body (as it is linked to that of the suffering Indian), which moves audiences to sympathize with slave characters and recognize their

inherent virtue, thereby assigning a contested moral legibility to America's "peculiar" institution. Minstrel entertainment came into being alongside melodrama in the early nineteenth century and, in the case of slavery plays, the two forms became integrally connected. A consideration of the prevalence of minstrelized representations of blackness on the melodramatic stage informs this part of my dissertation. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often discussed as the archetypal slavery melodrama, I aim to show that various approaches to slavery have shaped the melodramatic tradition and its representations of race.

Chapter Four centers on Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* (1859). As a sensational melodrama replete with suspenseful action sequences, intensified pathos, and actual explosions on stage, *The Octoroon* is a prime example of melodrama's capacity to incorporate contention while providing patchwork or faux solutions to racial conflict. My reading of the play emphasizes its suggestion of cross-racial alliance between New World Africans and indigenous peoples, while problematically trying to contain the threats posed by such a possibility. While the play hinges on the suffering of slaves, it does nothing to challenge the system of slavery itself, a feat Boucicault manages through an adept manipulation of melodrama's paradoxical resolutions.

Two slavery melodramas that have received far less attention than *The Octoroon* are the African-American author William Wells Brown's 1858 *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (Chapter Five) and the white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child's 1858 *The Stars and Stripes: A Melo-drama* (Chapter Six). Both plays provide an opportunity to look at alternative forms of melodramatic performance. W. W. Brown performed

dramatic readings of his melodrama in which he voiced all the characters himself, while Child published her melodrama in an antislavery gift book providing a virtual acting scenario for families to perform in their homes. Infusing melodrama with a sharp comic imagination, W. W. Brown turns blackface into a means of exploding the destabilizing racial identities that melodrama tries so hard to pin down. Combining this strategy with the paradoxical search for moral (il)legibility provided by melodrama, he dismantles white authority and turns the suffering of the slave body into a motivating force for the exertion of black agency. I also provide a consideration of the black female identities that are represented in the play that complicates the existing scholarly discussion of W. W. Brown's portrayals of black femininity.

As a leading figure of the New England antislavery movement, Child works to transform the idealism and seriousness of her culture into the material of a popular genre through ironic juxtapositions centered on the suffering slave body. She also borrows strategies of resistance from black abolitionists, including W. W. Brown, in an attempt to forge cross-racial solidarities that will move white abolitionists to act more energetically and even violently on the eve of civil war. Yet her appropriations of black cultural forms are problematic. Child is quite successful, however, in making visible the ways in which dominant simulations of blackness work to occlude the colonial relations that continue to sustain American slavery. My study of Child's melodrama, which has received scant attention, lays the groundwork for further investigations into her deep engagement with the melodramatic mode. In arguing that she borrows from W. W. Brown, I also provide new evidence for the two-way exchange of literary influence between these authors, which complicates the notion that W. W. Brown copied from Child in derivative fashion.

In providing an understanding of the variety of Indian and slavery melodramas on the antebellum stage, I aim to show the robust versatility of melodrama as a mode that continues to reflect and define America's search for moral legibility, however evasive that search may be. As a dominant form of cultural expression, melodrama has been instrumental in shaping the ways we think and talk about race and gender in America. The fact that melodrama still provides a means for the performative commons to probe these issues is evidenced by the contentious popularity of *Hamilton* in the twenty-first century. With his cast of victim heroes, virtuous heroines, and dissembling villains, Lin-Manuel Miranda imbues America's founding history in the mold of melodramatic myth. Despite the many melo-dramatizations of the nation's revolutionary origin that have been created on stage, film, and television, *Hamilton* feels fresh in the ways that it incorporates the vibrant culture of hip-hop into its racially constructed representations of virtue and villainy. Miranda, a first-generation Latino immigrant, makes the most of the contradictory potential of the theatrical sign when it is split into its narrative (mimetic) and embodied (ontic) registers. With one of the most diverse casts to play on the Broadway stage, *Hamilton* reflects the fact that race continues to be one of America's most pressing moral dilemmas and that melodrama's interpretive framework still reigns as the venue of choice for contending with it.

PART ONE

THE RISE OF AMERICAN MELODRAMA: THE FIGURAL THEATER IN COLONIAL HISTORY AND INDIAN PLAYS FROM THE 1820s TO THE 1840s

The melodramatic tradition originates within the context of circum-Atlantic colonialism as a narrative performance mode that seeks to make moral sense of such relations. In the case of American melodrama, the cultural performances that told stories about the significance of New World settlement can be seen as prominent shapers of this tradition. This is especially the case since North American settlers often imagined the colonial project in theatrical terms. Coming from European cultures steeped in a rich theatrical tradition in which *theatrum mundi* tropes were widely prevalent, these settlers conceived of theater as a particularly useful figuration that could be adapted through religious and political rhetoric to represent their new colonial situation. Such figural adaptations positioned North American settlements as stages on which exceptional secular and religious histories were being performed for the world's spectators.

Drawing together prior critical discussions of the early colonists' theatrical rhetoric, the smattering of theatrical performances of Indian identity circulating around the Atlantic basin prior to the nineteenth century, and the prominent literary texts that sought to make sense of European contact with indigenous New World peoples, I provide

an original account of melodrama's rise as a dominant American art form that has its roots in colonialism. Theatrical figurations of the Virginia and Massachusetts Bay colonies, in particular, exerted a foundational influence on the actual performances of early American melodrama. Historical accounts of the Virginia colony portrayed European settlers and Native Americans as earnest actors on the stage of history in ways that were later manifested in the popular Indian melodramas of the nineteenth century. In addition, Puritan conceptualizations of New World settlement as an "errand into the wilderness" (as it has been called by the historian Perry Miller), of visible sainthood, and of gracious affliction bear strong resemblance to later secularized, melodramatic conceptualizations of morality. Although by the early nineteenth century the Calvinist religious doctrines underpinning these conceptualizations (such as election, predestination, and perfectionism) were no longer felt to fulfill the search for moral legibility (at least not by society as a whole), secularized melodrama provided contested answers to this search that bear the influence of earlier colonial ideologies. In jeremiads and captivity narratives, two forms long considered to be integral to the American literary consciousness, the colonists used such religious concepts to make moral sense of their wars with Native Americans in ways strikingly similar to nineteenth-century melodrama's moral engagement with the continued conflicts of frontier settlement.

Throughout his colonial writings, John Smith presents readers with a theatrical vision of New World settlement that hinges on performance as it relates to moral truth, gendered relations, and historical significance. Such a vision influenced later American melodrama since Smith's writings became a major source for nineteenth-century plays. As Jeffrey Richards explains, Smith, in depicting himself as a "true actor," positions

himself as the representative performer in the “figural theater of history” (85-88). For Smith, a “true actor” is one who plays his part in the play of life with earnest sincerity and integrity; in other words, one who actually is what he seems to be as opposed to “meere Imposters”—like the dissembling Dutchman Valda who betrayed the English to the Powhatan Indians, a tribal group of the Algonquian peoples of the coastal woodlands (qtd. in Richards 91). The distinction between “true actors” and dissembling hypocrites is of the utmost concern to Smith because dishonest performances, such as Valda’s, threaten the survival and success of the colony to which earnest actors, such as Smith considers himself to be, are truly committed. In melodrama, this concern with the nature of performance shapes both character and plot as heroes and villains are established based upon the moral (un)truth of their actions. So the historical Valda becomes fictionalized as a melodramatic villain in Indian melodrama of the early national period.

Theatrical metaphors are in abundance throughout Smith’s *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) as are descriptions of performance. Beginning with his telling of how Pocahontas saved his life by preventing her father, Wahunsenaca (known as Powhatan to the English), from putting him to death, Smith emphasizes a series of dramatic reversals of fortune that play out through intensified heroic action, noting that “our comaedies never endured long without a Tragedie” (*Generall Historie* 95). This pattern informs later melodramas about the history of the Virginia colony in which the action alternates between scenes of pathos and action in a dizzying series of reversals designed to exhilarate audiences. At the center of such plays is the figure of Pocahontas who, as she does in Smith’s *Generall Historie*, instinctively recognizes the virtue of the hyper-masculinized English soldier-settlers and

makes herself available to them as an ally and sexual partner. The melodramatic version of Pocahontas as a heroine defined by her ability to exude and recognize virtue derives from Smith's depictions, which facilitated settler colonialism by feminizing Virginia itself—its lands and peoples—in the figure of a welcoming and desirable Indian woman. The gendered relations that shape Smith's account of the colonial project become crystalized in the mythologized history that then becomes a key source for Indian melodramas.

The *theatrum mundi* trope provides an overarching framework for Smith's *Generall Historie* that encourages a reading of Virginian colonialism as performance. In a prefatory poem, William Grent describes Smith's actions in the English colony:

in faire Actions, Merits height descride:
Which (like foure Theaters to set thee forth)
The worlds foure Quarters testifie thy worth.
The last whereof (*America*) best showes
Thy paines, and prayse; and what to thee shee owes . . .
For opening to Her Selfe Her Selfe, in Two
Of *Her* large Members; Now *Ours*, to our view. (*Generall Historie*)

Metaphors of the world stage and the sexualized woman intersect in this portrayal of England's colonial aims. A seasoned soldier, Smith has fought in the four corners of the world, but, as Grent conveys, America is the stage where his greatest battle in the drama of history will be fought. As Richards articulates:

And though the general idea will be expressed more forcefully a century later, the notion that the American theater will show Smith to best advantage illustrates the wider view that America is the stage on which Western civilization will have its last, best performance. (96)

Indian melodramas of the nineteenth century do, in fact, show Smith to best advantage. Interpreting the violence of settler colonialism as actions on the stage of history is

something that Smith shares in common with the religious nonconformists settling New England to the north.

Despite the Puritans' well-known contempt for the playhouse, their writings are chock full of theatrical metaphors.¹⁰ American theater historian Walter J. Meserve notes, "It is interesting to look at the writings of those stern [Puritan] accusers of the drama and see how very dramatic they frequently were both in the kind of material they chose to discuss and in their mode of presentation" (21). Typically, Puritans deployed theatrical figurations in two ways, either as a way of dramatizing the private soul's perilous journey through affliction and redemption until its predestined fate would be revealed in the final act of God's revelations *or* as a means of articulating the special status of their theocratic settlements as ushering forth the ultimate fulfillment of perfection in the grand cosmic drama of providence. Although this rhetoric is steeped in a Calvinist perspective, it still shares in common with Smith's rhetoric a representation of individual action as "true" performance as well as a positioning of New World settlements as stages raised before the world. In his thorough examination of the metaphor of the world stage in colonial America, Richards touches upon the works of dozens of Puritan leaders and shows that theatrical figuration had been encoded into the language of errand and covenant by early nonconformist thinkers in Europe:

Behind the uses of theater metaphor by early Christian writers lies the agonistic vision of reality contending with disguise, truth battling deception, the uncostumed followers of God ripping off the masks of hypocrites and sending them to judgment, offstage. And as a historical vision, the patristic view of the Bible transforms the rhetoric derived from pagan theater to produce a language of triumph, an imperial-style celebration of victory over the Devil's troops—and over time itself. (34)

European cultural performances centering on trials for heretics and ritual punishments for martyrs enhanced such a theatrical vision of Christianity. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that in his biography of John Calvin, William J. Bouwsma devotes an entire chapter to discussing the Protestant father's use of theatrical metaphor in theologizing the soul's path to salvation. Theatricality had also already begun to inflect the Puritan understanding of history, evidenced by Thomas Beard's *The Theatre of God's Judgments* (1597), a popular work that told of the fall of European monarchs as God's spectacular punishment of sinners.

With the figural theater in their minds, New England Puritans conceived of their colonial errand in pointedly dramatic ways that have had a lasting impact on American culture. In *Figures or Types of the Old Testament* (1683), Samuel Mather formulates a theory of typology that has influenced the tradition of American symbolism. "A type is some outward or sensible thing ordained of God under the Old Testament, to represent and hold forth something of Christ in the New," Mather writes (52). Historically verifiable, types are factual prefigurations or promises of what will be fulfilled in the anti-type (Jonah's three days in the whale prefigure, and are abrogated by, Christ's three days in the tomb, for example). Although Mather prohibited the extension of typology to current events, this did not prevent many Puritans from viewing themselves as the anti-type of the Hebrews, appointed by God to build a New Jerusalem in the American wilderness, a perfect society that would usher in the millennium. In the *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), for example, Cotton Mather describes the colonists' departure from England, headed by John Winthrop, as the last and greatest in a series of premillennial migrations, thereby integrating secular history into soteriology in which persons and

events take on an eschatological significance. In this way, “Early New England rhetoric provided a ready framework for inverting later secular values—human perfectibility, technological progress, democracy, Christian socialism, or simply (and comprehensively) the American Way—into the mold of sacred theology,” as Sacvan Bercovitch asserts (*Puritan Origins* 136). Melodrama can be seen as exemplifying this tendency since it often casts America as the locus of innocence. When its citizens fall from the path of redemption, melodrama stages the retrieval of its virtue to restore its destined path (Williams 12). Always hovering in the background is the notion of America as an exceptional society, ordained for perfection.

Functioning in tandem with the conception of “the errand into the wilderness” was that of visible sainthood. The Puritans believed in the doctrine of predestination, which precluded the possibility of free will. Only God, with the power of omniscience, knew if an individual was chosen for salvation or not, and if he/she was chosen, an experience of divine grace would ensue. Full church membership was only granted to those who demonstrated such an experience of regeneration. The performance of good works, prayer, and church attendance, though they could not affect the predestined fate of the soul, were often considered outward signs of regeneration, exemplifying “visible sainthood.” Michael Colacurcio considers the psychological implications of such doctrines. It is likely that the conception of visible sainthood led to the sin of presumption (assuming that one is saved) for some, while for others, it may have evoked extreme anxiety and a continual surveying of self and others for signs of grace (“Visible Sanctity and Specter Evidence” 392). For the Puritans, the tendency was not to allow for ambiguities, particularly in regards to sin—seeing the outward sign of adultery, for

example, a Puritan would likely conclude a person to be unregenerate (Colacurcio, *Doctrine and Difference* 194). The fact that the Puritans saw themselves as a “New Israel” raised the stakes; if their errand was to usher in God’s kingdom on earth, then their success depended on their status as true saints. It is easy to see how this potentially leads to a Manichean worldview in which people are saved or unsaved, good or evil. Moral status becomes an ontological truth that cannot be altered.¹¹ This worldview structures melodrama, which operates on the staging of virtue and the subsequent identification of heroes and villains. This staging depends on the externalization of immutable inner states of being into visible signs.

The ideology underwriting the concept of visible sainthood is apparent in the most theatricalized of Puritan works, which often represent hypocrites as villainous and Native Americans as accessories to evil. Sermonizing on the theatrical performance of the menacing hypocrite, Thomas Hooker says:

A carnal hypocrite, a cursed dissembler, is like a stage-player. He takes upon him the person and profession of a godly, humble, lowly man, and acts the part marvelous curiously, and he speaks big words against his corruptions and he humbles himself before God, and he hears and prays and reads; but when God plucks him off the stage of the world and his body drops into the grave, and his soul goes to hell, then it appears that he had not the power of godliness; he was only a stage-player, a stage professor. (93)

In Hooker’s formulation, the hypocrite is the antithesis of the visible saint. In using his body to (falsely) signify through dissembling performance a state of grace that he does not truly possess, the hypocrite threatens the ability of the congregation to perceive God’s moral order. This, in turn, threatens the Puritans’ special sense of their errand and covenant in the New World. Accordingly, hypocrites have a conspicuous role to play in

the sensationalized and popular narrative poem, Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom; or, A Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment* (1662). As Richards describes of this poem:

[It] has many elements of stage drama: it opens in medias res ('Still was the night'), it assembles a cast (Christ, train, 'goats,' 'sheep'), it uses dialogue (sinners pleading, Christ judging), it circumscribes activity (courtroom motif), and it provides stage directions in the margins ('The wicked brought to the Bar'). (109)

As the ultimate dissemblers, Wigglesworth's hypocrites are first in line to be damned to hell on judgment day: "At Christ's left hand the Goats do stand, / all whining hypocrites, / Who for self-ends did seem Christ's friends, / but foster'd guileful sprites: / Who Sheep resembled, but they dissembled / (their hearts were not sincere)" (27.1-6). Native Americans, or the "heathen," are also in line for damnation in Wigglesworth's poem as agents of evil "blind" to God's grace (34.1). For the Puritans, the moral standing of the performing self depended upon the congruence between interior (spiritual) states of grace and outer (bodily) actions tied to the affective capacities of the heart. As it is portrayed in the *Day of Doom*, dissembling hypocrites throw the Puritan perception of reality into question as only God can tell who is saved. Christ's purging, which constitutes the primary scene of action on judgment day, provides a revelation that resolves the doubt provoked by hypocrites. A similar, although secularized, worldview pervades melodrama in the form of hypocrite-villains who cause virtuous innocence to be misrecognized until the cosmic order is ultimately restored through a series of heightened actions and reversals of fortune. The fear of hypocrites and the threat they pose to corporate responsibility is everywhere apparent in Puritan culture from the antinomian controversy to the Salem witchcraft trials. Bearing the influence of these earlier colonial ideologies,

melodrama provides a new ritual form for casting out and identifying hypocrites in the early republic.

Within the Puritan worldview exemplified here, “heathen” Natives often function as a physical manifestation of Satan’s malignancy and, in tandem with hypocrites, afflict the true saints. As Richard Slotkin observes:

Looking at the culture of the New World in which they had come to live, the Puritans saw a darkened and inverted mirror image of their own culture, their own mind. For every Puritan institution, moral theory and practice, belief and ritual there existed an antithetical Indian counterpart. (57)

Two foundational American literary forms of Puritan origin, the jeremiad and the captivity narrative, illustrate this point. In the face of mounting conflicts between Puritan settlers and Native Americans, Increase Mather delivered one of the fiercest of the colonial jeremiads, *The Day of Trouble Is Near* (1673).¹² In it, he represents the attacks of the Indians as the scourge of God’s affliction designed to sanctify His chosen people.

Increase Mather’s *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England* (1676) expands upon this jeremiadical application of affliction in its interpretation of King Philip’s War (1675-1676), a violent conflict in which the Pokunoket chief Metacomet (known as King Philip to the colonists) led the Wampanoag, Nipmuck, Pocumtuck and Narragansett nations. The fighting lasted fourteen months and destroyed twelve frontier towns, ending shortly after Metacomet was captured and beheaded. It was one of the most traumatic events in the colonial history of New England given the relative number of Native American and European settler lives lost. In his *Brief History*, Mather proposes sin as the cause of war: “But God saw that we were not yet fit for Deliverance, nor could Health be restored unto us except a great deal more Blood be first

taken from us” (4). Mather’s exhortations work on the premise of gracious affliction, the notion that God afflicts those He plans to save so that they will know His power and mercy and thus be purified and brought to righteousness. As Bercovitch observes, gracious affliction is a commonplace in hagiography but “startling as a framework for interpreting the secular, terrestrial course of a community” (*Puritan Origins* 53). For those Puritans who considered themselves to be sanctified on the basis of “the errand,” visible sainthood, and gracious affliction, there could be little doubt that the war with the Wampanoags and their allies was a manifestation of God’s chastening love. This interpretive strategy turns actual historical events into eschatological phenomena, thereby investing extreme violence towards Native American peoples with teleological purpose. As Mather says, “no man can doubt of the *justness* of our cause” (*Brief History* 4).¹³ Similar logic informs later American melodrama, which relies heavily on displays of intense suffering to signify virtuousness, and in so doing, transforms the events of history into episodes revealing moral and cosmic truths.

Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682),¹⁴ makes use of the concept of gracious affliction in much the same way that Mather does in his sermons and histories. This text is often seen as exemplary of the captivity narrative and has been hailed as “America’s first best-seller” and “a foundational work in American literature” (Lepore 20). While the early publication history of the narrative is hazy, it was reprinted in subsequent editions at times that seem to coincide with the colonial conflicts with Native peoples, first following King Philip’s War, then in 1720 following the Yamasee War in the southeastern colonies, then in 1770 during the revolutionary period (when several Native nations allied with the British), and

then in the 1790s as frontier conflicts with the Shawnee, Delaware, Creek, and Cherokee came to a head (Stratton 20). Rowlandson views her captivity during King Philip's War as an affliction brought on by God: "it was easy for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off the thread of my life and cast me out of His presence forever. Yet the Lord still showed mercy to me, and upheld me; and as He wounded me with one hand, so he healed me with the other" (239). Likewise, she sees her deliverance as an indication of her salvation rather than an act of benevolence on the part of her master, the Narragansett sachem Quinnapin. Rowlandson represents herself as a victim-hero whose suffering proves her innocence, thereby transforming her private regeneration into a testimonial for the colonial cause.

Rowlandson's narrative also shares with Mather's *Brief History* a typological view of history that justifies an interpretation of events as revelatory of a Calvinistic moral cosmology. Identifying herself and the Puritans as victorious in the war by God's design and therefore virtuous, she repeatedly describes the Indians as "bloody heathens," "wolves," "hell-hounds," "murderous wretches," and "ravenous beasts." In addition to demonstrating her own regeneration, Rowlandson reveals what she considers to be the hypocritical, villainous betrayal of the Indians by providing a list of individuals who, she charges, professed themselves to be Christians and then fought against the colonists (257-58). Similar to the plot of a melodrama, innocence and villainy are initially misrecognized, but through the staging and retrieval of virtue such identifications are made legible in a moment of public recognition. As Billy J. Stratton demonstrates in discussing the transatlantic connections between American captivity narratives and fifteenth- and sixteenth-century accounts of travelers to the Far East as well as captives of

the Turks and Barbary pirates, this ideological framework—while indicative of the special ways in which Puritans conceived of their New World settlements—is also derived from a colonial discourse that had long since positioned non-European peoples as demonized, animalistic Others (24-35). Tracing the layerings and substitutions of Old World and New World discourses lays bear the colonial relation undergirding European and Native American conflicts and so points to the ways in which Rowlandson's narrative elides Native subjectivity and the actual causes of war (i.e. the aggressive expansion of colonial territory and hegemony) through simulations of Indians as diabolical Others. As Stratton asserts:

In this mythico-historical tautology, the fundamental relationship between the signifier and the signified is ideologically displaced, with Native subjects negatively defined within the categorical binaries of good and evil, civil and savage, and Christian and pagan, producing a system of correspondence that is self-constitutive, self-perpetuating, and beyond the purview of conventional modes of referentiality. (35)

Melodramas of the nineteenth-century continue this system of reference, encapsulating these and other simulations¹⁵ of the Indian in the embodied performances of whites playing Indian characters, thereby further circulating a series of substitutions that both reflect and conceal colonial relations.

It is also relevant to the discussion of melodrama that follows to note that discourses regarding gender intersect with those regarding race in Rowlandson's narrative. As a white woman, Rowlandson's captive body figures as a border zone, or frontier, between colonial European and Native societies. Although an actual rape never occurs in the narrative—a fact that Rowlandson attributes to God's grace rather than Native agency—the threat of it looms large as it does in almost all captivity narratives.

The preservation of Rowlandson's virtue warrants her re-entry into Puritan society following her captivity and is posited as a sign of her regeneration, so the avoidance of miscegenation, forced or otherwise, functions as a means of discursive colonial control reinforcing racialized distinctions between the Puritan Self and Indian Other. As Rebecca Blevin Faery says:

That the Indians always 'defiled' their female captives was (and long remained) a commonplace of colonialist rhetoric, part of the demonizing discourse the Puritans used to construct essentialist versions of Indian identity and to justify their expansionist politics, despite the evidence, including Rowlandson's, that rape was not a usual practice among the Algonkian peoples. (46)

At the same time, Rowlandson's sexualized body also acts as a figure for the land itself in ways both similar to and different from the Native woman's body in the mythologized character of Pocahontas, which leads Faery to explore "how this couple [the white woman captive and Indian princess] . . . have articulated cooperating ideologies of race and gender to construct . . . a version of white American identity, subjectivity, and nationhood throughout the history of the United States" (9). Rowlandson's narrative is organized according to "Removes," which refers to each time her Native captors moved their camps further inland to escape colonial forces or to find food. She effectively maps the territory covered in her narrative, positioning her own body as a marker of this fluctuating border, as a means of de-territorializing Native lands, paving the way for European settlement. The movements across the land, just as the "avoided" threats to her body, inscribe moral legibility onto the history of the war in ways that will be adapted in future melodramas.

For all of its teleological orientations, Rowlandson's narrative is not quite so neat of a package as perhaps Mather, who in all likelihood wrote the preface, may have wished it to be.¹⁶ Scholars have detailed the points of elision and contradiction within the text. This leads Faery, on the one hand, to unpack the "double-voiced discourse" that alternates between "theological framework" and "colloquial style" (30), while Stratton posits that Rowlandson may not even be the true author of the narrative at all and suggests the possibility that Mather wrote the work in its entirety. To be sure, the text's theological interpretations are not always congruous with Rowlandson's account of her experiences, such as relishing raw bear meat or beginning to understand the humane customs and sophisticated networks of Wampanoag and Narragansett society. Ultimately, however, such incongruities make the imposition of a typological framework all the more necessary since Puritan theocracy had already predetermined that the events to come in King Philip's War would be acted upon the world stage in a drama of providential design.

Much as Rowlandson could not help but adapt to Native ways of life whilst living amongst Metacombet's people, many Europeans came to identify with Native Americans in troublesome and problematic ways. Even as Puritan ideology sought to villainize Indians, alternative (but related) theatrical interpretations of Indian identity were circulating in the Atlantic world. In her study of the colonial performative commons, Dillon traces the emergence of the tortured Indian prince as a figure for popular sovereignty. Following the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell issued *A Declaration of His Highness, by the Advice of his Council: Setting Forth, on the Behalf of This Commonwealth, the Justice of Their Cause against Spain* (1655). This declaration provides a "justification" for English imperialism in the New World by drawing upon the

Black Legend of Spain's cruelty to the Native inhabitants of the Americas. Since the Spanish have tortured and killed the Indians, Cromwell asserts that the world can assume that the Indians prefer English rule. With English theaters closed during the Interregnum, William D'Avenant's *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* (1658), a public masque incorporating elaborate scenery, music, and dance in a performance of spectacle, was one of the very few dramatic enactments allowed under Cromwell. It featured the three figures presented in Cromwell's *Declaration*, the cruel Spanish invader, the tortured Indian prince, and the justly sovereign English settler. Affective identification with the tortured Indian facilitates colonialist expansion and popular sovereignty:

[T]he sovereign (popular) subject performs torture on the body of the alien who threatens the sovereignty of the state with his/her lack of consent to its authority. . . . It is this tortured body that appears on stage as a figure of liminal and/or contested English sovereignty: to the extent that the audience identifies with and affectively claims the tortured body before it, popular sovereignty is enacted in the theatre. (Dillon 84)

This sympathetic theatrical figuration manufactured the consent of (absent) Indians through the consent of the populous to state authority and grew ever more popular in the Restoration period as theaters reopened. D'Avenant's masque was a direct source for John Dryden's sensational play *The Indian Emperour* (1665), for example, featuring the torture of Montezuma by the evil Spaniard Pizarro. Colonial simulations of the Indian—tortured prince, welcoming princess, diabolical monster—circulated around the Atlantic world in their various forms throughout the period of colonial expansion.

In the North American colonies of the eighteenth century, the austerity of Puritanism gave way to the unbridled enthusiasm of revivalism, which was then translated into the rhetoric of civil millennialism as a theatricalized revolutionary spirit

swept through the populous. The jeremiad persisted, becoming a popular form of dramatic sermon used by charismatic preachers like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Grandison Finney, and Lyman Beecher to elicit intense emotional responses from their congregations, sparking widespread revitalizations of religious piety known as the Great Awakening (1730s-1740s) and the Second Great Awakening (1790s-1830s). Whitefield, the most popular of these preachers, grew up reading and performing plays, leading biographer Stuart C. Henry to say that he “was a born actor” (18) and Ola Winslow to suggest that he brought Americans their “first taste of theater under the flag of salvation” (xviii). Sensationalizing the fear of damnation and the joy of salvation by intimating that the end times were nigh, preachers like Whitefield compelled congregations to surrender to God’s will and undergo an affective conversion experience in which they felt themselves regenerated (or reborn) as Christians, often demonstrated through ecstatic weeping, swaying, and shouting.

These ritualistic displays had such a far-reaching influence on colonial cultural expressions that revivalist rhetoric was infused into political language and performance.

As Nathan O. Hatch says:

The civil millennialism of the Revolutionary era, expressed by rationalists as well as pietists, grew directly out of the politicizing of Puritan millennial history. . . . civil millennialism advanced Freedom as the cause of God [and] defined the primary enemy as the Antichrist of civil oppression rather than that of formal religion. (53)

During this time, the people began to enact popular sovereignty through ritual performance in the form of burning effigies, mock funerals, property destruction, saturnine parades, musical processions, and mob violence. With the call for democratic revolution colonists conceived of God “as the Great Director, America as a Theater of

Providence, and the war effort as the Stage of Action . . . the completion of which would leave the stage open for a Spectacle of Glory” (Richards 247). As American colonists prepared to turn their world upside down, they pressed social turmoil into play-like rituals and maximized the rhetorical potential of America as a figural theater.

It is within this context that actual performances of “playing Indian,” to borrow Philip Deloria’s phrase, came into cultural prominence. White colonists who began to identify as American rather than European dressed and performed as Indians, drawing upon the colonial simulations of the Indian circulating throughout the Atlantic world. Increasingly associated with the theory of primitivism, the tortured Indian prince was often depicted as a “noble savage”¹⁷ whose innate goodness had not yet been tainted by the corruption of commercialized civilization while, at the same time, versions of the Indian as a monstrous Other endured. Tammany Societies, men’s clubs that took the Delaware leader Tamenend as their figurehead, sprung up in Pennsylvania (Tamenend had granted William Penn land and water access) and spread throughout the middle colonies and even along the southern seaboard. Dedicating May Day (May 1st) as Tammany Day, society members staged ritual performances centering on the death, burning, and rebirth of “Tammany” while dressed in Indian costumes. Deloria explains that these adaptations of European carnival traditions represented the “disappearance” of Native peoples from the land and the rise of their successors (i.e. white creoles or Euro-Americans) as connected in a cycle of renewal, a ritual that symbolically transformed white Americans into “aboriginal Tammanys themselves” (Deloria 18). In a related enactment, the Boston Tea Party demonstrators dressed as a Mohawk war party, throwing British tea into the harbor while wearing feathers, blankets, and soot on their faces, even

grunting and speaking “Indian” in a red-faced performance. Turning the Indian into a metaphor for individual freedom, land rights, and popular sovereignty, revolutionaries adapted the figure of the tortured Indian prince to signal British villainy and American victimry, while simultaneously menacing royalists with the threat of savage violence.

Amidst political performances of supposed “Indian-ness,” dramatic depictions became ever more popular in the actual (as opposed to the figural) theater. Indian pantomimes and ballets soon morphed into hybrid forms of emergent melodrama, such as *Tammany; or, The Indian Chief* (1794), a republican drama with music by Anna Julia Hatton (sister of the famous actress Sarah Siddons) played at the behest of the New York City Tammany Society (Odell 2.346-347). Only a year later August von Kotzebue’s fully-fledged melodrama, *Die Spanier in Peru; oder, Rollas Tod* (1795) would debut soon to be adapted by Richard Sheridan as *Pizarro* (1799) and William Dunlap as *Pizarro; or, the Death of Rolla* (1800), all influenced by Dryden’s *The Indian Emperour*. Sheridan’s version played every season in New York City from 1800-1863. Rolla is an Indian prince who defends the Inca against the cruel Spaniard Pizarro before bequeathing his beloved (Inca) Cora to the humane Spaniard, Alonzo, and saving their creole son by sacrificing his own life. Alonzo is thereby indigenized through a performance that is similar to those of the Tammany Societies and that elides and legitimizes European imperialist violence. As Dillon asserts:

The performance of settler colonialism that took the shape of operatic heroism in D'Avenant's *Cruelty* thus assumes the form of melodramatic (familial) embodiment in Sheridan's *Pizarro* [as] white upstart colonial creoles . . . and Indian kings [are] required to shed their colonial relationality in order to perform in a new drama of U.S. nationhood. (233, 220)

Yet, even as melodrama took hold on the American stage, Native Americans continued to offer performances of their own that provided alternative representations of Native identity. The actor Solomon Smith recounts the “rogue” performance of twenty-some Creek who were contracted to play the Peruvian army in a staging of *Pizarro* in the 1830s. Instead of playing their parts, the Creek interrupted the melodrama with their own ritual song and dance:

To attempt stopping them [i.e. the Creek], we found would be a vain task, so that after a moment or two of hesitation, the virgins made a precipitate retreat to their dressing rooms, where they carefully locked themselves in. The King, Rolla, and Orano stood their ground, and were compelled to submit to the new order of things. The Indians kept up their song and war-dance for full half an hour, performing the most extraordinary feats ever exhibited on a stage, in their excitement scalping King Ataliba, (taking off his wig,) demolishing the altar, and burning up the Sun! As for Lern and I, (Rolla and the High Priest,) we joined in with them, and danced until the perspiration fairly rolled from our bodies in large streams, the savages, all the time, flourishing their tomahawks and knives around our heads, and performing other little playful antics not by any means agreeable or desirable. (Smith qtd. in Gaul 19)

After the curtain dropped, the Creek continued. In this snapshot of early American theater, white actors play colonial simulations of the “vanished” Indian as Native Americans refuse the melodramatic roles assigned to them and re-substitute a performance of their own agency. As a form with its roots in colonialism, melodrama may seek to assign moral legibility to race in ways that reinforce white hegemony; but, as we will see, the actual performances themselves were often quite complex, especially if we situate individual melodramas within the broader network of performance relations circulating within the post-colonial world of America’s early national period.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE LAST OF THE WAMPANOAGS”: MELODRAMATIC PORTRAYALS OF METACOMET BY JOHN AUGUSTUS STONE, EDWIN FORREST, AND WILLIAM APESS

Turning to the Indian plays of the early nineteenth century, we can see the influence of the figural theater (as conceived by New World colonists) on the actual, raucous theater of the new nation. In one of his first performances of great popularity, the larger-than-life celebrity-actor Edwin Forrest played Rolla in Sheridan’s *Pizzaro* (Alger 199-204). Not long afterwards, he issued a call for an original play script “of which the hero or principal character shall be an aboriginal of this country” (qtd. in Moody 88), and John Augustus Stone, who had seen Forrest perform as Rolla, answered the call with *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829). So the tortured Indian prince of colonial performance morphed into an Americanized hero.¹⁸ *Metamora* is loosely based on the historical personage of Metacomet, or King Philip, and dramatizes his attempts to defend his people and family from the New England colonists. There were eight plays written about Metacomet in the nineteenth century, but only Stone’s *Metamora* survives. Undoubtedly, this preservation is due to the fact that the melodrama was an absolute sensation, catapulting Forrest to national fame and playing more than two hundred times

over the next forty years (Jones 66). After paying Stone his \$500 prize money, Forrest pocketed the profits, earning \$33,000 in one season alone, a situation that illustrates the connections between colonial expansion and capitalist commodification (Sayre 124).¹⁹

Metamora espouses primitivism and presents a noble, heroic figure in its lead Indian character. It is typical of the “heroic melodramas” that dominated the American stage in this period, as defined by McConachie. These heroic plays begin in the setting of a natural Arcadia of egalitarian freedom, which is ended when the powerful and corrupt destroy these people’s homes. The hero emerges as one of these victims to become a charismatic leader battling against the oppression of his people, but he is deserted or betrayed, and therefore dies at the hands of the villains as a Christ-like martyr for republican freedom and liberal equality (McConachie 104). Utilizing melodramatic convention, *Metamora* draws upon colonial simulations of the Indian in order to provide moral legibility to the traumatic events of King Philip’s War in a way that squares with the recent origination of America as a republican democracy. *Metamora* is the most commonly discussed Indian melodrama and several critics, like McConachie, have analyzed its construction of national identities. However, my reading incorporates into the conversation audience responses to Forrest’s ontic performances as well as Native American reactions to this cultural phenomenon in order to demonstrate the extent to which *Metamora* provided proliferating occasions for contentious takes on the moral (il)legibility of America’s colonial past.

Metamora, an epitome of the “noble savage,” is portrayed as a melodramatic victim-hero, and his suffering at the hands of the colonists garners audience sympathy. His virtuous nature is the subject of the play’s opening scene:

OCEANA. Teach him, Walter; make him like to us.

WALT. 'Twould cost him half his native virtues. Is justice goodly? Metamora's just. Is bravery virtue? Metamora's brave. If love of country, child and wife and home, be to deserve them all—he merits them.

OCEANA. Yet he is a heathen.

WALT. True, Oceana, but his worship though untaught and rude flows from his heart, and Heaven alone must judge of it. (Stone 1.1)

As Walter makes clear, it is not possible to assimilate Metamora because his natural virtues are opposed to the “advanced” state of Euro-American civilization, even if his virtues are superior. It is Metamora’s capacity for love and worship flowing from his *heart* that makes him a melodramatic hero. Metamora feels intensely, and these feelings lead him to virtuous action. Sensationalized battle scenes between the Wampanoags and the colonists provide an exhilarating backdrop for the staging of Metamora’s righteousness and feed the growing demand for melodramatic spectacle on the part of American audiences. Amidst the chaos of fighting and burning homes, Metamora decides to spare Oceana and her father:

METAMORA: [Seizes Oceana; flames seen in house.] The fire is kindled in the dwelling, and I will plunge her in the hot fury of the flames.

MORDAUNT: No, no, thou wilt not harm her.

OCEANA: Father, farewell! Thy nation, savage, will repent this act of thine.

METAMORA: If thou art just, it will not. Old man, take thy child. Metamora cannot forth with the maiden of the eagle plume; and he disdains a victim who has no color in his face nor fire in his eye. (Stone 3.4)

Significantly, Metamora does not only save Oceana from the threat of Indian violence, he also protects her from the dissembling villain Lord Fitzarnold, a British aristocrat who follows Oceana to her mother’s tomb and attempts to kidnap her so that he can marry her against her will. Having found his way out of his own imprisonment through a tunnel, Metamora emerges from the tomb of Oceana’s mother just in time to save her from the

villain's rapacious clutches. In a reformulation of colonial discourse, an otherwise hyper-masculinized Metamora is feminized in this scene as a captive figure and also through his association with the absent mother. He offers Oceana the symbolic protection of a parent. The vulnerable white woman becomes, as is typical, the literal site over which colonial powers battle, but here she is saved not from diabolical Indians but from avaricious Europeans. Metamora's merciful actions are further contrasted with those of the white settlers who, when placed in a similar position of power, kill Metamora's son and cast his innocent wife out of jail into the hands of a violent mob.²⁰ Metamora's sympathy for the virtuous white heroine, Oceana, facilitates white audiences' sympathy for his sufferings in return.

Critics have argued that *Metamora* helped facilitate the Indian Removal Act of 1830 on the basis of two claims: first, that Forrest purposely chose this play in a bid to win favor with the Democratic party, and second, that through the noble-yet-vanishing Indian construct the play allows white audiences to grieve over the loss of Metamora while acquiescing to the inevitability of his demise.²¹ There seems to be little evidence to support the first claim, other than the fact that Forrest became a staunch Democrat later in life (Martin 81). Metamora is certainly noble and he does "vanish," so the second argument is plausible, but this still does not account for the overt guilt Stone casts on the colonists for their treatment of the Indians. At least one audience in Augusta, Georgia (1831), was greatly angered by what they perceived as the condemnation of their treatment of Native Americans and Jacksonian removal policy. Stone does not shy away from a bold articulation of Native American grievances against the colonial settlers. Interrupting the colonists' war council, Metamora charges them with initiating

aggression, employing trickery to get their way, hungering for land that does not belong to them, demonstrating ingratitude for the help they received from his people, and implementing the same forms of oppression that they fled from in England (Stone 2.3). Ending as it does with *Metamora*'s curse on the white settlers, the play can be viewed as "a vengeful jeremiad looking to history for ultimate vindication" (McConachie 109):

METAMORA. The last of the Wampanoags' curse be on you! May your graves and the graves of your children be in the path the red man shall trace! And may the wolf and panther howl o'er your fleshless bones, fit banquet for the destroyers! Spirits of the grave, I come! But the curse of *Metamora* stays with the white man! (Stone 5.5)

Given these features, why was *Metamora* not seen as expressing anti-removal sentiments by audiences more often? In general, theatergoers across the political spectrum liked the play.

The answer lies in Stone's melodramatic formulation of villainy, for British aristocrats are the embodiments of evil in this play, not the colonists as a whole. Lord Fitzarnold and Mordaunt (a secret participator in the regicide of Charles I) exacerbate the tensions between the Indians and the colonists. Fitzarnold commits the most atrocious acts of the play, such as preying upon the virtuous heroine, Oceana, and throwing Nahmeokee, *Metamora*'s wife, to the angry mob. He is the quintessential aristocratic villain borrowed from European melodrama who pretends to be an upstanding gentleman even as he plots the demise of those around him. His hypocrisy knows no bounds, an attribute that would have signaled his evil treachery to American audiences. The truly "American" characters (i.e. those born on New England soil), Oceana and Walter, are sympathetic friends to *Metamora* and they imbibe his heroic qualities after his death. In these ways, Stone aligns colonial hegemony with British aristocracy rather than the

American imperialism of the nineteenth century. This tendency is enhanced by the public persona Forrest crafted for himself as a Jacksonian common man and the mythic Jeffersonian “yeoman farmer” (McConachie 68).²² In Stone’s and Forrest’s hands, the “noble-but-doomed savage” becomes the source of an idealized national character, and guilt over the genocide of Native Americans is projected onto the British, thus occluding and thereby assisting American imperialism.

Such a strategy relies upon the secularized use of the Puritan tendency to interpret history through the lens of typology. Gordon M. Sayre details the ways in which American literature of the 1820s and 1830s debated the interpretation of Puritan colonial history in reference to the recent developments of political sovereignty and just rebellion, ultimately positing King Philip’s War as an analogue or typological figure for the American Revolution (81). Lydia Maria Child, for example, in *The First Settlers of New-England; or, Conquest of the Pequods, Narragansets and Pokanokets, As Related by a Mother to Her Children, and Designed for the Instruction of Youth* (1829), calls Metacomet a “heroic chief [who] displayed the most undaunted determination to preserve his independence, and guard the rights of his country against a foreign power who usurped dominion over them” (157). In Stone’s play, Fitzarnold’s threat to Oceana represents the British threat to American independence, and *Metamora* ultimately sanctions the American right to rule, as Sayre argues (121-122). This configuration effectively substitutes the older colonial triad of cruel Spaniard, tortured Indian prince, and just British ruler with that of cruel British aristocrat, doomed Indian king, and worthy American inheritor, as Dillon demonstrates, thereby creating “an origin myth of white

nationalism that produces the United States as the consecrated future of a contentious native and English heritage” (234).



Figure 1. Portrait of Edwin Forrest as Metamora by Frederick Styles Agate in oil on canvas (c. 1832)

Nevertheless, the play contains enough of a challenge to Euro-American domination for Grimstead to claim that it “was the only sufficiently honest and powerful Indian drama to jar white complacency” (217). In “playing Indian,” Forrest was continuing a tradition of symbolic performance that fully formed during the revolutionary era with Tammanys and Mohawk tea partiers. Records of his performances indicate that Forrest played redface so well that white audiences, at times, came quite close to actually perceiving him as Indian. Forrest’s biographer, William Alger, tells of the time Forrest spent amongst the Choctaw “when he had adopted their habits, eaten their food, slept in

their tents . . . and left the print of his moccasins on their hunting-grounds” (240), resulting in a performance in which Forrest “was completely transformed from what he appeared in other characters, and seemed Indian in every particular, all through and over, from the crown of his scalp to the sole of his foot” (239). In making this character come alive for white audiences, Forrest relied upon a physicalized acting style incorporating pantomime and exaggeration in a truly melodramatic performance that evoked visceral emotion from his audiences: “Metamora folds his mighty arms and plants his mighty legs, and with his mighty voice sneers at us ‘Look there!’ until the very ground thrills and trembles beneath our feet” (*Harper’s Magazine* qtd. in Gaul 12).

Such a phenomenon arises out of both the mimetic and ontic registers of theatrical performance in complex ways, which can lead to interpretive friction. As Deloria says of the revolutionary rituals that involved “playing Indian”:

In the process [the colonists] created a new identity—American—that was both aboriginal and European and yet was also neither. They controlled the center in an intricate, shifting three-way system of self-identification. Although this control was effective in establishing an American identity as both non-English and non-Indian, its continued openness prevented its creators from ever effectively developing a positive, standalone identity that did not rely heavily on either a British or an Indian foil. After the Revolution, Americans remained stuck in the middle. (36)

While for many white audiences Forrest’s character succeeded in conveying the supposed rights of an indigenized, white American identity, this was not always the case, which testifies to the slipperiness of the embodied significations of performance. Dillon suggests that the actual presence of Native bodies might have offered a counter-narrative so that when it was performed to hostile crowds in Georgia the “mimetic force of the vanishing Indian thus gave way . . . to the ontic force of [Cherokees] present within the

commons” (239). Certainly, this may very well have been the case, but it is also the case that the Georgian audience read Forrest’s embodied performance itself as that of a menacing, threatening Indian instead of a vanishing one. As one of the actors reported, “[The Georgians] felt indignant at any reference to the stealing of Indian property, and especially so at being menaced with the tomahawk and scalping-knife of the red man’s vengeance so bitterly threatened,” while a prominent Georgian lawyer accused, “Why, his eyes shot fire and his breath was hot with the hissing of his ferocious declamation. I insist upon it, Forrest believes in that d-----d Indian speech, and it is an insult to the whole community” (Murdoch qtd. in Gaul 14). In this instance, white audiences perceived Forrest’s melodramatic portrayal as one of authentic Indian-ness, shifting the symbolic meanings of the play.

The script, however, does assign moral structures to both the characters and the plot that position American “inheritance” of the land as sanctified, eliding the genocidal violence of past and present. To do so, Stone vocalizes the injustices leading to the suffering of its victim-hero, and then restores the order that led to that suffering in the first place. It is as if through staging the recognition of virtue and evoking empathy, evil can be purged from that order. The result is ideologically contradictory as melodrama often is since it tends to “find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which [it] wishes to return” (Williams 37). In this case, the old moral certainty that *Metamora* wishes to return to is the innocence of America’s national origins, long maintained by Puritan ideology and extended through republican mythologizing. As responses to actual performances of *Metamora* show, however, this patch or faux solution did not neatly resolve the problems

of racial conflict but offered a framework for staging contentious versions of moral legibility.

Apparently, there were times when Native Americans were physically present in the theater for productions of *Metamora*. As Alger describes:

Many a time delegations of Indian tribes who chanced to be visiting the cities where [Forrest] acted this character—Boston, New York, Washington, Baltimore, Cincinnati, New Orleans—attended the performance, adding a most picturesque feature by their presence, and their pleasure and approval were unqualified. A large delegation of Western Indians . . . were so excited by the performance that in the closing scene they rose and chanted a dirge in honor of the death of the great chief. (240)

One can only imagine the effect that the attendance of western Natives may have had on the wider audience at a melodrama that positioned Indians as vanishing and white Americans as the rightful possessors of their land, especially as those Natives hailed from nations that were currently at war with the United States. Possibly, many theatergoers interpreted Native attendance as approval, similarly to Alger, but perhaps such embodied performance provoked other interpretations as well. It is impossible to tell from Alger's biased description what these "Western Indians" were attempting to convey through their performance of a supposed "dirge," if they meant to complement the melodrama, to contest it, or to do something else altogether.

In 1836 at Boston's Odeon Theatre, the Pequot author William Apess gave two oral presentations of his *Eulogy on King Philip*, in which he offers a revision of the historiography of King Philip's War that claims Metacomet as a Native American hero akin to America's revolutionary founding fathers. The *Eulogy* responds in pointed ways to the dominant discourses used to represent Metacomet both in the present and in the

colonial past. As *Metamora* was by far the most widely distributed version of this history at the time Apess was writing, it is likely that he was well aware of its popularity perhaps even having seen it himself since it played numerous times in his home state of Massachusetts, just blocks away from the Odeon. Despite this important fact, Apess's *Eulogy* is not often read alongside Stone's melodrama even though doing so can highlight key connections between the two works.²³ Appropriating the rhetoric of typological historiography and civil millennialism, Apess places King Philip in ironic juxtaposition to George Washington:

[A]s the immortal Washington lives endeared and engraven on the hearts of every white in America, never to be forgotten in time—even such is the immortal Philip honored, as held in memory by the degraded yet grateful descendants who appreciate his character; so will every patriot, especially in this enlightened age, respect the rude yet all-accomplished son of the forest, that died a martyr to his cause, though unsuccessful, yet as glorious as the *American* Revolution. (277)

His characterization of King Philip is quite similar to Stone's, but Apess lays bare the ironic contradictions in such a formulation. Apess also emphasizes the capacities of the heart in the opening to the *Eulogy* as a means of facilitating cross-racial sympathy, much as the beginning of Stone's play does with *Metamora*: "Justice and humanity . . . prompt me to vindicate the character of [Philip] who yet lives in [Indian] hearts and, if possible, melt the prejudice that exists in the hearts of those who are in possession of his soil" (277). Yet Apess will show, based on the facts of historical record, both oral and written, that this land was wrongfully taken, not bequeathed to white Americans through the affective displacements orchestrated by Stone. Mimicking the figurations of Puritan Manicheanism and melodramatic depictions of villainy, Apess emphasizes the hypocritical behavior of the early English colonists in (1) claiming that they were

attacked with unprovoked savagery on the part of the Indians when, in fact, the settlers were the first aggressors (278); (2) citing the dissembling tactics used by the English to capture Indians (including children) and sell them into slavery (279-280); (3) describing with horror the English practice of “feasting the savages” by inviting the Indians to dinner only to murder them with their own weapons (283); and (4) asserting that the English warriors who were lauded as honorable by Puritan leaders were in actuality agents of genocide (278-279). Apess charges that hypocrisy is the basis of colonial racism: “O thou pretended hypocritical Christian . . . I do not hesitate to say that through the prayers, preaching, and examples of those pretended pious has been the foundation of all the slavery and degradation in the American colonies toward colored people” (279, 304). Turning the dominant rhetoric on its head, he represents hypocritical whites as the most severe threat to a just and more perfect society.

Apess further dismantles the logic of historiographical typology that has been used in both religious and secular terms to justify colonial violence. Noting that “there is a deep-rooted popular opinion in the hearts of many that Indians were made, etc., on purpose for destruction, to be driven out by white Christians, and they to take their places; and that God had decreed it from all eternity,” he provides an alternate interpretation of scripture in which men of all colors are made in God’s image as evidenced by the fact that God’s own son was a person of color (287). One of the most important aspects of the *Eulogy* is its presentation of the speech that Metacomet gave at the war councils of the Wampanoags and their allies. There is no other version of this speech in the written record, but Stratton explains that Metacomet’s words were “passed down through the generations in the spirit of Wampanoag oral tradition and sacred

history” and that the account of John Easton, an English official sent to attempt negotiations with the Natives, verifies “the spirit of his appeal” (91). Apess’s version of Metacomet’s speech is as follows:

Brothers, you see this vast country before us, which the Great Spirit gave to our father and us; you see the buffalo and deer that now are our support. Brothers, you see these little ones, our wives and children, who are looking to us for food and raiment; and you now see the foe before you, that they have grown insolent and bold; that all our ancient customs are disregarded; the treaties made by our fathers and us are broken, and all of us insulted; our council fires disregarded, and all the ancient customs of our fathers; our brothers murdered before our eyes, and their spirits cry to us for revenge. Brothers, these people from the unknown world will cut down our groves, spoil our hunting and planting grounds, and drive us and our children from the graves of our fathers, and our council fires, and enslave our women and children. (295)

Interestingly, there are parallels between this speech and Metamora’s famous speech on Indian grievances in Stone’s play in that Metamora also indicts the English for initiating violence and coveting hunting lands that rightfully belong to the Indians. Of course, there are important differences between the two speeches as well. Most notable, Metacomet speaks to a Native war council in Apess’s version (a verifiable fact) while Stone rearranges things so that Metamora gives his speech at an English war council. Accordingly, Apess’s Philip focuses exclusively on what these grievances mean for *his* people—that their livelihood and traditions are under threat due to colonial expansion, whereas Metamora’s speech points more so to what such grievances mean for Euro-Americans—that the reinstatement in the New England colonies of European religious oppression threaten the foundations of republican equality on which America will come to depend. In other words, Apess’s version centers Metacomet and the Wampanoags

while Stone's version substitutes a simulation of the tragically doomed Indian as a useful foil for white civilization.

Apess plays with such popular simulations of Indian-ness throughout the *Eulogy* and also with simulations of Puritan saints and glorified founding fathers in a series of uncanny reversals, substitutions, and doublings. His historical interpretations, meanwhile, are carefully supported through citations of primary sources, many of them Puritan in origin. In this parodical performance of exaggerated irony, Apess deploys the language of colonial hegemony against itself. As Barry O'Connell says:

The very terminologies of an Americanist discourse, which value Euro-Americans precisely through implied contrast to their Indian opposites, are expropriated, inverted, or used as though they could characterize Indians as aptly as Euro-Americans. This 'Rev. William Apess, an Indian,' confounds savage and civilized, pagan and Christian, devil and saint, villain and hero, the polarities upon which Euro-American culture has built its sense of legitimacy. (xxi-xxii)

The fact that Apess delivered the *Eulogy* in a public address enabled him to use embodied performance as part of the message. His presence as a Pequot Indian, a descendant of the survivors of a deliberately genocidal war who were subsequently forced to sign a treaty that professed the extinction of their people, provided an undeniable challenge to the notion of America having lost the last survivor of any Native nation. Accordingly, Apess closes his *Eulogy* by calling for peaceful and righteous conduct on the part of white Americans to Native peoples in his present time. Placing Apess's oration within the context of melodramatic performance shows how its rituals of community formation could be adapted to localized situations and therefore take on various, contentious meanings depending on the responsive performances of different actors and audiences.

CHAPTER TWO

VILLAINOUS INDIANS AND VIRTUOUS HEROINES: *NICK OF THE WOODS* FROM PAGE TO STAGE

The melo-dramatist Robert Montgomery Bird revised *Metamora* for the English stage per Forrest's request and also wrote *The Gladiator* (1831) for another of Forrest's prize contests. Forrest neglected to pay Bird for his revision, refused to pay him more than the original prize money for *The Gladiator*, and denied Bird's request for assistance in publishing his plays. Such financial difficulties as a playwright caused Bird to turn to writing novels instead, as he was then able to obtain copyrights and exert more control over the content of his work (Grimstead 168-169). One of his novels, *Nick of the Woods; or, The Jibbenainosay* (1837) makes use of the captivity narrative in order to combat the romantically idealized figure of the Indian as portrayed in works like *Metamora*. As Bird writes in his preface:

The dreams of poets and sentimentalists have invested [the Indian] with a character wholly incompatible with his condition. Individual virtues may be, and indeed frequently are, found among men in a natural state; but honour, justice, and generosity, as characteristics of the mass, are refinements belonging only to an advanced stage of civilization. (142)

On these overtly racist grounds, Bird dramatizes the frontier violence of 1780s colonial Kentucky in order to "justify" Indian removal policy, perhaps even going further than

that with an unabashed call for complete extermination. While this novel has been discussed in terms of sensational romance, frontier adventure, and gothic horror, I argue that Bird draws most heavily from his experience as a writer of stage melodramas in his creation of heroes and villains and in his exteriorization of inner moral states.²⁴ The fact that this play was adapted for the stage several times, the most important of which was Louisa Medina's, speaks to its melodramatic leanings.

Nathan Slaughter, or Bloody Nathan, is the novel's ultimate melodramatic victim-hero. Exemplifying Quaker pacifism, Nathan did not resist the Shawnee when they came to his frontier homestead, and as a result his entire family was murdered before his very eyes. The Shawnee band, led by the villainous Wenonga, tried to kill Nathan, too, and they scalped him, but miraculously he survived. Ever since, he has wandered the woods, making brief appearances at frontier outposts. His pacifism leads the frontier settlers to mock him as a coward, although they do not know of his past. In the beginning, it is as Peter Brooks describes of melodrama generally: virtue is misrecognized and expelled from its natural terrain, wandering afflicted because it cannot establish signs in proof of its nature (30). A learned woodsman, Nathan agrees to lead the lost travelers, Roland, Edith, and Able Doe to safety. Along the way, they are pursued by various bands of Indians, attacked, and taken captive. In melodramatic fashion, evil reigns triumphant, controlling the plot and structure of events until virtue shows itself and is redeemed.

Little do these travellers know that Nathan is "Old Nick of the woods," the Jibbenainosay, "Spirit-that-walks," or the Shawneewannaween, "the Howl of the Shawnees," as he is variously called, a man or spirit who murders Shawnee in the forest, scalps them, and mutilates their corpses by carving a cross in their chests. Through a

series of sensationalized battles, chases, and intensely violent action, Nathan proves himself to be a virtuous hero, willing to risk himself to save others and vanquish the enemy. These scenes present the acting out of virtue's liberation from evil, a melodramatic version of catharsis in which evil is purged in ritual form and virtue is restored (P. Brooks 32). Amidst this reversal, Nathan's hideous scar from having been scalped is revealed to Roland and the story of his past suffering is told. The scar is an outward sign of Nathan's affliction that proves his suffering and therefore his virtue. His excessive violence is justified, made heroic, as righteous revenge. From this point onwards, Nathan is no longer referred to by his various bloody appellations; instead, periphrastic epithets, such as "the avenging angel" and "the protector of innocence," which are so typical in stage melodramas, indicate his goodness. Using the melodramatic formulation of the victim-hero, Bird legitimatizes genocidal violence in much the same way as the Puritans did, by turning affliction into a sign of inner virtue. By default, the Indian is the villain.

Wenonga, or "the black vulture," is the novel's quintessential melodramatic villain, as his epithet (or, as Nathan claims, the English translation of his name) makes clear. Just as Nathan bears the signs of virtue on his body, so Wenonga bears the signs of villainy. He has scars all over his face and chest, wears a skin covered with tufts of human hair taken from his victims, and dons a head ornament made of the beak and claws of a vulture—quite the costume for a novelistic character. According to Brooks, the melodramatic stage villain establishes his true identity through self-nomination (39). Wenonga does exactly this when he says, "Me Injun-man! . . . Me kill all white-man! Me Wenonga: me drink white-man's blood! me no heart!" (Bird 224). This is the crux, for in

melodrama everything depends on the heart as virtue is recognized through sympathy for suffering. If Indians do not have the capacity to recognize virtue, let alone to be virtuous, as Bird insists, then they are the embodiment of evil and deserve death. As Peter Brooks explains of melodrama generally, “evil’s spectacular power is a reenactment of the primal scene, a moment of intense, originary trauma, offering a present horror only explicable in terms of past horror” (35). Wenonga’s slaughter of Nathan’s family occurs before the time of the novel, a scene of originary trauma that sets Nathan on the path of righteous revenge. After Nathan slays Wenonga in the chief’s own home, he grabs the scalps of his family members and flees with them, bearing external signs of his past affliction. Thus, the reader is continually reminded of Nathan’s status as victim-hero and of Wenonga’s status as villain.

Adding to Wenonga’s villainy is his captivity of Edith, the typical melodramatic heroine who guards her chastity and remains pure to the end. Her captivity provides the impetus for much of the novel’s action, and her rescue by Nathan further demonstrates his heroism. Using this motif, Bird inflects his melodrama with the overtones of the widely read colonial captivity narratives, such as Rowlandson’s. They share a worldview that divides good and evil and a belief that such morality can be demonstrated through the outward signs of affliction. Symbolized by the white woman’s embodied purity, the Puritans figured the frontier in the context of “the errand into the wilderness,” thereby affecting “a decisive shift in the meaning of frontier from barrier to threshold . . . a figural outpost, the outskirts of the advancing kingdom of God” (Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent* 51). Bird utilizes a nineteenth-century formulation, which has its roots in Puritan thinking, of the frontier as the threshold of an advancing stage of civilization. Through such

ideological and melodramatic tactics, his novel endorses American imperialism, including the militant violence and removal policies of Andrew Jackson's administration.

The theatricality inherent to Bird's novel accounts for its several stage adaptations, the most successful of which, by far, was Louisa Medina's sensational melodrama *Nick of the Woods: A Drama in Three Acts* (1838). Women's contributions to American theater, and melodrama in particular, have been relatively overlooked by scholars. Despite the fact that in Medina's time "the executive functions of theatre-manager and playwright were carefully defined as requiring supposedly masculine qualities of mind and personality," women playwrights had been penning plays since the very beginnings of American theater, and they increased in number over the course of the nineteenth century (Powell xi). Medina, however, is the first woman known to make a living exclusively as a playwright in America, and she wrote more plays for the nation's theater than any other woman writer of the period, at least thirty-four by Miriam López Rodríguez's count, despite dying quite young after working only five years as a playwright (33). An immigrant and an orphan, Medina was born in Spain and received an education well above the norm for a woman in those days, having studied Latin, Geometry, and Algebra as well as learned French and English, in addition to her native Spanish, and published original works in British periodicals starting at the age of twelve (Rodríguez 30). The first American dramatist (of either sex) to achieve the long run, Medina was an acknowledged master of adaptation.²⁵ She was a great innovator of so-called "blood-and-thunder" melodramas, sensationalized spectacles of technical achievement that drew enthusiastic crowds, and thus has exerted an enormous influence on American theater. Such spectacles featured exploding volcanoes, giant cataracts, live

animals, burning dwellings, and movable set pieces of intricate design. As the house playwright of the Bowery Theatre in New York City, Medina essentially made owner-manager Thomas Hamblin's career.²⁶

As a "blood-and-thunder" melodrama, Medina's *Nick* made strong use of special effects, extravagant costuming, sensational action, and thrilling music. The "Bowery Slaughter House," as it was often called, had become well known for its lavish productions under Hamblin's direction and *Nick* did not disappoint. After its debut in 1838, it consistently played into the 1880s and "remained the most successful American melodrama for more than half a century" (Smith xviii). Elaborate action sequences dominate the play, and with the script calling for music in more than fifty places, an original score was composed (Wilson 159). Privileging adventurous exploits, exhilarating suspense, and non-verbal means of expression, this is melodrama in its most spectacular form. *Nick* was popular not only in New York City but nationwide, as productions cropped up from coast to coast in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Louisiana, Montana, Utah, and even Oregon (Wilson 161). Several novice actors who performed in the play thereby launched their careers, including Joseph Proctor (Nick) and Mary Shaw (Telie Doe). Despite the fact that Medina's *Nick* seems to have exerted just as much cultural influence as *Metamora*, scant critical attention has been paid to the play. Bank and Rodriguez provide valuable overviews of Medina's career, and Katherine Wilson provides an account of the path that Medina's textual script for *Nick* took as it was used for professional and amateur productions around the country. The only scholar to provide a critical reading of the play, however, is Mullen whose points of emphasis differ substantially from my own (177-211).²⁷ Making several changes to Bird's novel, Medina

provides alternate depictions of white frontiersmen and white female heroines while still presenting an anti-primitivist simulation of Indian identity that stands in opposition to Stone's *Metamora*. Through an adept deployment of melodramatic convention, she orchestrates a ritualistic performance of frontier violence that evokes and then erases colonial hybridizations in a fraught attempt to read American history through the lens of moral legibility.



Figure 2. Colored print of Joseph Proctor as the Jibbenainosay in *Nick of the Woods* (c. 1877). Dressed in leggings and animals skins, he holds a staff in one hand and a knife in the other.

The opening of the play perhaps bears Medina's mark as an orphaned immigrant, for it features a train of wanderers arriving at a frontier outpost in Kentucky in need of sanctuary. In melodramatic fashion, the emigrants enter the stage in song: "Wanderers from our native hearth, / Exiles from our homes of birth, / Weary, faint, and wasted, we / With joy our place of refuge see" (Medina 1.1). In the first lines of dialogue Roland adds, "[B]efore us lies the station of our refuge. Here, then, let us . . . offer our prayers to that power who has led us safely through the pathless wilderness" (Medina 1.1). With biblical overtones, Medina depicts these immigrants, and the orphaned Roland and Edith, within the context of a typological view of westward expansion in which new Kentucky outposts figure the Promised Land and the settlers are like God's chosen people. This sets the stage for the violent attacks that are soon to come.

In the same act, the dissembling villain, Braxley, plots to kill off Roland and forcibly marry Edith, recognizing her as the heir to a Virginia planter's fortune. To do so, Braxley enlists the help of Abel Doe, "a lying white Injun" (i.e. a renegade white settler who has taken up residence with a nearby Indian tribe), and Piankeshaw, a demonized Indian. Their night attack on the sleeping Roland is foiled, first by Telie Doe (Abel Doe's daughter) and then by Nick, Nathan Slaughter, or the Jibbenainosay (as he is variously called). Nathan brutally murders Piankeshaw before he can scalp Roland: "Dog of an Indian, red skin, red wolf, die! Murdering coward, die a murderer's death (*Dashes him down and places cross on his breast*) Blood for blood! Remember the avenger!" (Medina 1.3). After this vicious murder and corpse mutilation, the scene ends, framing Nathan and the body in a melodramatic tableau: "*Music. Picture of horror. Lightning, thunder, &c. Tableau*" (Medina 1.3). It is typical in melodramas for tableaux to provide sustained

focus on scenes of intense action that assign moral legibility to the events on stage, and so this tableau points to the “rightful” triumph of Nathan’s revenge. This is somewhat cloaked in dramatic irony, however, since the settlers do not yet know who Nathan is, whether he is a man or a spirit, as is also typical of melodrama which uses such irony to drive suspense. It is not until the final act of the play that Nathan’s full identity is revealed as that of Reginald Ashburn, whose family was brutally murdered by Indians and for which “just” cause he has sworn “eternal war upon them and their accursed race” (Medina 3.1). The mutilation of Piankeshaw’s corpse with a mark of sanctity (i.e. the cross cut into his flesh) is a most disturbing dramatic substitution for earlier acts of corpse mutilation performed by Euro-American settlers, such as the dismemberment of Metacomet. The fact that Piankeshaw is actually the name for an entire Native nation, not an individual person, is symbolic of genocidal violence.

This is only the beginning of the exhilarated action, reversals, and spectacles that account for much of the play’s performance on stage. One such climactic scene (and there are more than one) takes place on the Salt River with a giant “cataract in motion” and movable, or “practicable,” set pieces (Medina 2.5). Braxley has made an alliance with the diabolical arch-villain Wenonga, the Shawnee chief little changed from Bird’s novel, and they pursue Edith and Roland through the wilderness, who are led and protected by Telie Doe, Nathan, and the horse-thieving frontiersman Ralph Stackpole. A battle ensues, set to music of course, in which Edith and Roland are taken captive as Nathan is “precipitated down the cataract in a canoe of fire” to the utter terror of the Indian warriors (Medina 2.5). One can only imagine how this elaborate action scene played out on stage to the enthusiastic delight of the infamously raucous crowds at the

Bowery. It is most representative of melodrama's ritualized form in which exaggerated alternations between pathos and action drive a consensus on moral significations through embodied gestures. Identifying with Nathan, audiences perhaps felt their own stomachs drop as his canoe pitched over the waterfall. In this way, the battle of good v. evil was staged as sensationalized action in order to heighten the audiences' emotional response while heaping blame onto the villain. These over-the-top gestures and never-before-seen technological feats do more than entertain; they invest the action with a sense of teleological purpose by making it all seem larger than life, fated, revelatory of cosmic truths. The typological significance, although the Puritan theological framework is absent, remains. Similar to Rowlandson's captivity narrative, these action sequences mark the imaginary wilderness in boundaries (for example, using the Salt River as a marker) through a series of removes that dramatize the supposed progress of manifest destiny.

At the center of this mapping is Edith, a white woman threatened with rape by both the Indians and the aristocratic white villain. As was also the case with Rowlandson's narrative:

[C]onstructions of race, gender, and sexuality, which included the threat and presumed practice of rape are crucial to the effort of tracing the emergence of American nationhood and the ways it employed and deployed white women's bodies and sexuality in constructing its founding discourses of 'race.' (Faery 52)

Medina's Edith, however, lacks the subjectivity of Rowlandson's self-depiction and the sentimental appeal of Bird's passive characterization. She is essentially no more than a prop and has very little dialogue so that there is no basis for an emotional engagement with her character. Perhaps through the actress's embodied performance, Edith was only

meant to be part of the spectacle. As theater historians have noted, Hamblin “exploited—both commercially and sexually—a succession of young women who worked at the Bowery” illuminating “the pitfalls that the emergence of aggressively profit-oriented theatre held for women” (Dudden 56). The result was an increasingly objectified display of female sexuality designed to titillate spectators. Such a display meshes with a formulation of rape that has very little to do with an actual violation of the female subject and much more to do with the ways in which her body could be claimed by men, like the land itself, as a means of establishing white colonial dominance. Whatever the reasons, Medina did not put much of her imaginative energies into developing Edith’s character but instead transformed Telie Doe, a minor and passive character in the novel, into an exciting action heroine.

It is a long-held and widespread opinion taken for granted amongst critics that melodramatic convention only held passive roles for women as unrealistically pure and innocent creatures in need of protection, in other words, as damsels in distress. A closer look at the range of melodramas on the nineteenth-century stage, however, seems to suggest otherwise, and Medina’s *Telie Doe* is a prime example. Offering an important if overlooked perspective, Faye E. Dudden has scanned through the most popular melodramas of the antebellum period to determine that the majority of them do, in fact, feature active women characters (71). Likewise, *The Bowery* and its “b’hoys,” as they were called, have often been analyzed as representative of masculinized working-class theater.²⁸ While Hamblin’s Bowery audiences were often comprised of “American-born mechanics . . . young shipbuilders, cartmen, butchers, firemen,” according to the periodicals of the day, however, they also contained “young girls, factory hands, shop

tenders, street walkers . . . some few decent quiet family parties and many, very many little children. . . . Nice little girls in white dresses and gay ribbons . . . little sleepy boys and babies” (qtd. in Dudden 60). It seems to have been Medina’s women characters that attracted the most attention from Bowery audiences—“brave and active women who did not wait passively for the men around them to protect their lives and honor” (Rodríguez 38). As the *New York Mirror* reported, “[Medina’s] own sex enjoy in her popularity the triumph of a woman’s genius, and go to witness it” (qtd. in Dudden 71). Evidently, characters like Telie Doe appealed to these audiences—so much so that it did not take long for the play under discussion to be billed as *Nick of the Woods; or, The Renegade’s Daughter*, indicating that Telie vied with Nathan for consideration as the melodrama’s primary hero.

In addition to leading the orphaned Edith and Roland through the wilderness as the play’s most adept pathfinder, Telie saves their lives on four separate occasions, demonstrating that womanly virtuousness in no way precludes intrepid action. Upon meeting Telie, Nathan recognizes her embodied virtue according to melodrama’s secularized version of gracious affliction: “[T]hou hast the stamp upon thy brow, the fatal signet which these eyes can read, that tells of wasted love, blighted hopes, and early death. . . . mine eyes would weep again, did they gaze longer on thee” (Medina 2.1). Tears and suffering signify Telie’s moral status, which legitimizes her role in identifying and casting out the personification of evil. Finding Edith as Braxley’s captive inside Wenonga’s wigwam, Telie first casts the guilty finger at Braxley (who up until this point has not been publically recognized for the dissembling villain that he is) and then demasculinizes him in a fight:

Braxley. Hence, idle fool! I came not here to listen to thy prating.

Telie. Thou hast; ay and more, thou shalt hear me brand thee for the wretch thou art, thou vile destroyer of the orphan's right and captive's hope, basest of all that bears the name of man, thou villain traitor!

Braxley. By hell, to be thus braved by a puny girl!

Telie. Stand off! Touch me not, or I'll send thy coward soul to endless flames before thy master calls for thee.

Braxley. Death and hell! Thus, then, do I silence thee.

Music. He makes a pass at her, which she eludes. She seizes him by the neck and hurls him down, and stands over him with gun. Edith rises and comes down. *Picture.* (Medina 3.2)

Telie refrains from killing Braxley at Edith's request, showing that, in contrast to Nathan, she is a decidedly more merciful hero, although mercy is perhaps more warranted when bestowed upon a white villain as opposed to a diabolical Indian according to the play's racist logic. Still, in the melodrama's ritual staging of the revelation of guilt and innocence, Telie outs Braxley, providing audiences with the satisfaction of watching the villain's demise in a fulfillment of dramatic irony. What's more, she physically defeats him in a sensational display of feminized virtue's power. This is even more remarkable as Telie is indigenized as the white renegade's (i.e. Abel Doe's) daughter having been raised amongst the Indians. In this instance, "playing Indian" enables a white woman to step out of her culturally assigned position and take on an active role. Yet, seemingly attractive as it may be, such a performance depends upon the racialized view that Native women inherently lack the purity and civilized fragility of white women and therefore cannot occupy the privileged (if restricting) status of an Edith. Ultimately, Medina's white female empowerment does nothing to mitigate her atrocious racism as becomes even more apparent in the play's denouement.

Complicating this picture somewhat, however, is Medina's depiction of white frontiersmen who appear as only slightly better than her demonized Indians. Both Ralph

Stackpole and Nathan Slaughter perform a frenzied violence that is morally questionable even within the play's racialized schema of good and evil. As a buckskin-clad, horse-stealing, wild-whooping adventurer, Ralph is the quintessential stage frontiersman type made popular by James Kirk Paulding's Nimrod Wildfire in *Lion of the West; or, the Kentuckian* (1831). His outrageous antics were frightfully entertaining to audiences of mid-century melodramas. Medina's Ralph, however, surpasses Paulding's Nimrod in his untamed viciousness, at one point decrying, "Grim death and massacreation! O you perditioned brutes! Let me loose, you sum totalized red niggers, or tarnal death to me, I'll haunt you when I'm dead and eat you all, from a smoke-dried varmint skurmudgeon to a squally baby papoose" (2.4). Shocking brazenness is part of the appeal here, but Ralph's threat of cannibalism nevertheless turns him into a mirror for the diabolical Indians. The doubling continues as Ralph and Nathan team up to plot the rescue of Edith, lurk in the wilderness outside the Shawnee's village, and ferociously declare that "there'll be scalping enough for all of us" soon enough (Medina 3.1). Nathan is the most Indian-like of any of the white characters in the play. He even dons the disguise of a full Indian costume for much of the play's third and final act. While Nathan is somewhat indigenized in Bird's novel, Medina pushes the point much further. In their final confrontation, even Wenonga mistakes Nathan for an Indian enabling the latter to brutally kill Wenonga with the chief's own hatchet (Medina 3.4). In Bird's novel, Nathan is a deeply conflicted character. Having previously lived as a pacifist Quaker, he reluctantly kills Indians, whom he refers to as his "fellow creatures," in order to save "innocent" white lives under imminent threat. Medina's character speaks like a Quaker at times but never talks about his pacifist religious beliefs, does not grieve over killing the

Shawnee, and never questions his violent acts. He also rants and raves like an unintelligible lunatic in several scenes. Both the novel and the play seek to legitimize genocidal violence, but Bird does much more to depict Nathan's actions as somehow justifiable. Medina sheds light on the egregious brutality of frontier violence, painting both Indians and white frontiersmen in moral shades of black.

The difference in characterization accounts for Medina killing Nathan off at the end of her play in a major change to Bird's novel. The final resolution centers on the deaths of Telie and Nathan as the play's representative indigenized characters. In the process, both are purged of their Indian-ness. Telie passes in an "ecstasy" of "sweet oblivion," glimpsing the shining rays of heaven, redeemed in her willingness to sacrifice her racially tainted self in order to save the life of the white hero, Roland, whom she loves (Medina 3.4). Similarly, Nathan dies after his "work of vengeance is complete," glimpsing his deceased wife coming to lead him to bliss as he is finally revealed to everyone as Reginald Ashburn, the formerly peaceful pioneer patriarch. The homes of the Shawnee burn in flames behind him as the play ends in tableau (Medina 3.4). Through such means, the drama's most destabilizing identities are made to disappear, purging the corruption that has ensued as a result of white-Indian hybridization. Relying upon the moral significations of melodramatic conventions, Medina manufactures the erasure of colonial relations supplanting Indian civilization with that of "purified" white Americans. The contradictions inherent to such a resolution, however, were not tied up so neatly as audiences still clamored for Telie Doe's white simulation of Indian-ness, an insistent and problematic reminder of colonial hybridizations. In fact, Telie's destabilizing identity proliferated not only in the public imagination but also in the dozens of performances of

Nick that were staged throughout the country over the next several decades. It is as if she dies only to be continually resurrected through ritual performance, a prime example of how melodrama's patch or faux resolutions provide a framework for the never completed search for moral legibility.

CHAPTER THREE

A MELODRAMATIC INTERVENTION: THEATRICAL SIMULATIONS OF POCAHONTAS AND CHARLOTTE BARNES'S *THE FOREST PRINCESS*

While Medina's *Nick* features a pseudo or red-faced performance of female Indian identity, there are no actual Native American women characters in the play. Representations of Native women were prominent on the antebellum stage, however, most notably in the character of Pocahontas. As Susan Scheckel observes, Pocahontas was the "single most popular subject of Indian dramas during the nineteenth century," and it was during this period that Smith's account "assumed the status of foundational myth" (45). The many versions of this myth on the stage included Joseph Crosswell's *A New World Planted* (1802), James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage* (1808), George Washington Parke Custis's *Pocahontas; or, The Settlers of Virginia* (1830), Robert Dale Owen's *Pocahontas, A Historical Drama* (1837), Charlotte Barnes's *The Forest Princess; or, Two Centuries Ago* (1848), Seba Smith's *Powhatan: A Metrical Romance, in Seven Cantos* (1841), and John Brougham's burlesque *Po-ca-hon-tas; or, The Gentle Savage* (1855). Barnes's relatively unknown and often overlooked version of the Pocahontas myth in *The Forest Princess* blends melodrama with historical tragedy in its attempts to provide a revisionist history of New World settlement in

Virginia. It positions Pocahontas as a heroic matriarch with a benevolent vision of the racial interactions set into motion by imperial colonialism.

In offering an alternate version of the Pocahontas story, Barnes was likely responding to the other popular Pocahontas plays of the time, particularly Barker's and Custis's. Barker's *Indian Princess* is a ballad opera, but insofar as it uses music underlying dialogue and snippets of background (or theme) music to heighten the emotional responses of audiences as well as to emphasize the polarization of villainous antagonists, virtuous heroes, and persecuted heroines, it can be considered as an early form of melodrama on the American stage. Drawing upon John Smith's *Generall Historie* for inspiration, Barker borrows his figuration of the world stage. In the opening to Barker's play, Smith (the character) announces to his fellow soldier-settlers, "Gallant gentlemen, / We have a noble stage, on which to act / A noble drama; let us then sustain / Our several parts with credit and honour" (1.1). This positions America's colonial history as the great performance of Western civilization. Barker romanticizes and sexualizes Pocahontas, incorporating several marriage plots into the drama, and so blunts the brutality of colonial violence. Sexual overtones pervade the dialogue as the Virginia land, like Pocahontas herself, is represented as feminine, fecund, and available with "gay and lovely . . . skirting shores," a range where "The bosom can dilate, and the pulses play, / And man, erect, can walk a manly round" (Barker 1.1). As the sexualized object of conquest, Pocahontas loves John Rolfe at first sight, making herself almost immediately available to his kisses and caresses.

The *belle sauvage* is granted some agency, though, as she rebels against her father, Powhatan, to save Smith's life, to warn the English settlers of Powhatan's

imminent attack on their fort, and to marry Rolfe instead of her betrothed, the Indian warrior Miami. However, her rebellion is motivated by her instinctive recognition of white superiority for which she is willing to forego her loyalties to her own people. Pocahontas's willingness to assimilate to English ways is indicated by the switch in her dialogue from rudimentary prose to iambic pentameter upon meeting and falling in love with Rolfe, as well as by expressions like "Thou art my life! / I lived not till I saw thee, love" (Barker 3.2). Taking on a protective and nourishing role with the colonists (preventing their destruction by a surprise attack and bringing them food), Pocahontas also figures as a foster mother for the Jamestown colony and by extension for America as a nation, an idea that Barker sets up in the "Preface" to his play. As Scheckel asserts, "The figure of Pocahontas was thus called upon to carry a heavy and rather unwieldy ideological burden" (48). She represented both the sexualized object of conquest and America as a "mother" country to a new order of people in order to legitimate New World colonialism and US nationalism at the same time. Accordingly, the drama ends in a series of marriages centered on that between Pocahontas and Rolfe that are symbolic of the romanticized union between Old World and New World. For this Barker's play has been credited with popularizing Indian dramas on the early American stage and elevating the Pocahontas legend to national myth (Bak 175).

Custis's *Pocahontas* seems to have been the only Pocahontas play to surpass Barker's in popularity. As a fully-fledged melodrama, it was sensational with American audiences, perhaps helped along by Custis's well-known identity as the foster-stepson of George Washington. Although Custis gives some voice to Native American grievances by opening his melodrama with the warrior Matacoran expressing his motivations for

going to war against the English settlers, which include the whites' avariciousness and proclivity for viciousness, he ultimately villainizes the Indians and thereby "justifies" colonial violence. Custis romanticizes and sexualizes Pocahontas in much the same way Barker does, but he does not grant her the same agency and importance that Barker does in making her into a rebellious maternal figure fostering a newly born American identity. Custis's Pocahontas is passive and vulnerable, a damsel in distress who is scantily clad, falls in love with Rolfe at first sight, and is figured as a dappled fawn playing in the woods for the pleasure of the settlers' male gaze.

Reversing several elements of Smith's account, Custis stages the first encounter between English and Indian with Rolfe offering Pocahontas his chivalrous protection, which erases the historical fact that the Powhatans initiated peace through their generosity. Also, the valorous soldier, Hugo, saves the life of Matacoran in a battle by shielding him with his buckler, a move that, in effect, minimizes Pocahontas's heroic act of saving Smith's life by shielding him with her own body, which "is here anticipated and, in a sense, supplanted in significance" (Scheckel 62). In addition to lionizing the colonists in these ways, Custis villainizes the Indians to a much greater extent than Barker does. While Barker's Powhatan is noble yet misled, Custis's Powhatan is a bloodthirsty savage willing to offer up one hundred of his own men for ritual sacrifice and to torture and kill his captives by pricking them all over with pine needles and lighting them on fire. In this version, Pocahontas is only motivated to save Smith's life due to her conversion to Christianity. Custis also makes this sensationalized scene the final climax of his play, a substantial change to the order of events as they occur in Smith's account that has exerted a strong influence on subsequent adaptations of the story, including the

1995 Disney film *Pocahontas*. In marrying Rolfe, Pocahontas rejects all connections with her father and her race: “Cruel king, the ties of blood which bound me to thee are dissever'd, as have been long those of thy sanguinary religion” (Custis 3.5). As Scheckel says:

Pocahontas’s relationship to her English husband prefigures the subjugation of Indians by Euro-Americans. Pocahontas—the vulnerable, passive, and virtuous heroine of conventional melodrama who accepts the white man’s mastery willingly and cheerfully—permitted nineteenth-century audiences to envision an idealized version of the drama of conquest. (64)

It is evident that Barnes had Custis’s version of the Pocahontas myth in mind while writing her play.

By the time that Barnes wrote *The Forest Princess*, she was an accomplished playwright and actress. Since her parents were well-known actors, Barnes grew up on the American stage and began her acting career at the age of three. When she was twelve years old, Barnes watched her mother, Mary Greenhill Barnes, play the part of Pocahontas in a production of Custis’s play at the Park Theatre in New York City (Jaroff 483). Her mother was esteemed as one of the best tragic actresses of her time, and Charlotte was overshadowed by Mary early in her career but came into her own renown when she started to perform masculine roles, such as Shakespeare’s Romeo and Teodoro in her own (no longer extant) 1837 play *Lafitte; or, The Pirate of the Gulf* (Ireland 80). *The Forest Princess* debuted in Liverpool in 1844 before its American debut at Philadelphia’s Arch Street Theatre in 1848 where it was revived in May of 1850. It was published in Barnes’s *Plays, Prose and Poetry* (1848).²⁹ Barnes always played Pocahontas herself. Major differences between Barnes’s play and those of Barker’s and

Custis's include her positioning of Smith's rescue in the first act, detailing the captivity of Pocahontas in the second act, and featuring Pocahontas's death in England in the third act. No other stage versions of the Pocahontas legend include the captivity or the trip to England.

The two feminist critics who have discussed *The Forest Princess* provide glowing analyses that praise Barnes's version of the legend as radically humanistic and therefore far superior to the other versions on the stage. Ruth Stoner asserts that Barnes wanted to recognize Pocahontas not as "a crude little girl who considered her life of less importance than the Europeans' lives, but [as] a New Woman, a matriarch, who mediated between cultures in contact and established a model of leadership and action for her daughters to follow" (507). In her analysis, Rebecca Jaroff reads Barnes's Pocahontas as a skilled leader who values racial and gender equality and evinces loyalty to her people: "*The Forest Princess* clearly subverts popular Indian plays of the day by supplying Pocahontas with a voice, granting her political status, and allowing her to reject colonial domination" (483). The drama can also be read as a commentary on contemporary U.S./Native relations, particularly in regards to the Seminole Wars which were unfolding in Florida and which Barnes opposed, especially after meeting the Seminole leader Osceola.³⁰ Jaroff marshals this fact in support of her interpretation of the play as a radical protest to the treatment of Native peoples.

As these critics observe, Barnes does much to paint a more accurate and respectful picture of Pocahontas, but I argue that her melodrama challenges patriarchal power relations to a greater extent than those of colonial imperialism. Stoner and Jaroff are right to emphasize the ways in which Barnes's representation of the Indian princess

might be considered the most humanistic and dynamic; however, they do not adequately account for the melodrama's complexities, particularly those imposed by the problematic situation of a white actress "playing Indian" in redface. In addition, the play has not been discussed as a melodrama, but doing so clarifies its engagements with the dominant simulations of the Indian princess on the stage. Such an approach also points to the ways in which Barnes searches for moral legibility through the melodramatic conventions of hypocritical villainy, paradoxical resolutions, and the heightened gestures of pantomime. This throws Barnes's equivocal solutions to what she openly presents as the nefarious racial conflicts between Native peoples and Euro-Americans into sharp relief. Juxtaposing her melodramatic portrayal of the Virginia colony with primary source documents from both the English and the Native American records, I also give much greater consideration to Barnes's authorial choices regarding the adaptation of historical events into a popular form, especially as those choices pertain to Native subjectivities and oral traditions.³¹

Barnes explains her motivations for writing *The Forest Princess* in her introduction to the play, which relate to the lack of reliable information about Native peoples and history and the misrepresentations that ensue. She traveled to England to research Pocahontas and the founding of the Virginia colony at the British Museum, where she consulted at least twenty source documents. "The lack of intelligible chronicles has left the early history of the red men imperfect; the prejudice and injustice of their dispossessors have too often falsified or obscured their traditions," observes Barnes ("Introduction"). Emphasizing the importance of Pocahontas to American history,

Barnes notes that the Virginia colony would have been lost to England if it were not for her interventions:

How far the aspect of civilization, of national character and government, of literature and science, in America, would have been affected, had other lands given customs, laws, and language to so extensive and central a portion of our continent, is a question well worth of consideration, and in justice to Pocahontas, should ever be associated with her name.
("Introduction")

Barnes also defends her choice not to embellish the play with romance by attributing any of Pocahontas's actions to a motive of love in contrast to other Pocahontas plays, since such a course would "detract from the pure disinterestedness of a woman's fame" ("Introduction"). Instead, Barnes reads the historical personage of Pocahontas as an "animated type of mercy and peace, unselfishness and truth" ("Introduction"). Insofar as Barnes idealizes Pocahontas as a personification of civilization at its best, she challenges dominant representations of Indians as savage, primitive, and slated for extinction, even pointing to the survival and presence of the Powhatan people: "[S]ome of the most worthy families in our land are the living descendants of Pocahontas" ("Introduction"). In the spirit of historical accuracy, Barnes is careful to list the actual names of Native persons in her *dramatis personae*, even noting that Pocahontas was the title that Matoaka received as the daughter of the Powhatan, leader of the Native confederacy also named the Powhatan.

Matoaka was Pocahontas's birth name, so that much is correct, but Pocahontas, meaning "laughing or joyous one" was actually the name of Matoaka's mother, a Mattaponi woman who died in childbirth. Matoaka's father Wahunsenaca, a Pamunkey weworance (tribal leader) who became the Powhatan (head representative of the

confederacy), had a close bond with his daughter and called her Pocahontas after her mother because of his fondness for her and because of her playful spirit. This is according to the oral history of the Powhatan people, and Barnes would have no way of obtaining such information; it is clear that she strove for accuracy based on the sources available to her. The Mattaponi and Pamunkey were two amongst several Algonquian-speaking nations living in Tsenacomoca (the tidewater region of what is now Virginia) that comprised the Powhatan confederacy.

Barnes also acknowledges in her introduction that some amount of fictionalization was necessary to transform the complex episodes of history into a unified drama and also to fill in gaps in the historical record. The theme of the written historical record being subjective is interwoven into the action of the play itself, most obviously in the character of Todkill, a colonist who brings fabricated tales of his exploits back to England. Todkill announces, “Travelers, you know, are not bound to tell the truth. If they were, their books wouldn’t be half so entertaining” (Barnes 1.2). Such strategies point to the constructedness of historical documents calling into question their reliability, including the documents on which Barnes’s play is based. This positions the act of telling history as performative and enables a revisionist approach to the historical subject of the melodrama.

One noticeable revision Barnes makes lies in her refusal to sexualize Pocahontas, a move that bucks not only dominant representations of the Indian princess on the stage but also the growing trend to objectify female actors. Priscilla Sears tracks the erotic language used in nineteenth-century plays featuring Indian women that often position them as the embodiment of white male fantasy in the form of a beautiful, loyal, devoted,

willing sexual partner who worships the ground walked upon by European men (39-46). These plays “repeatedly insist on the desirability of whiteness,” to borrow Faery’s phrase (172), turning Native women into simulations of Indian princesses—conflated with their lands—that are ripe for conquest. The disturbing sexualization of Pocahontas goes back to the founding documents of the Virginia colony. William Strachey’s *Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia* (1612) is one of earliest mentions of Pocahontas, describing her as a ten or eleven year old girl visiting the Jamestown fort and rambunctiously cartwheeling with the boys there. Strachey emphasizes her nakedness and “well featured” looks as well as her characteristic playfulness (65). Writing about himself in the third person, Smith denies rumors that he may have designed to marry Pocahontas and so inherit a kingship in Virginia:

It is true she was the very nonparell of [Powhatan’s] kingdome . . . her especially he [i.e. Smith] ever much respected: and she so well requited it [that] If he would he might have married her, or have done what him listed. For there was none that could have hindered his determination. (*Proceedings* 128)

Despite attesting to his forbearance, Smith’s sexual consideration of the young Pocahontas (perhaps twelve or thirteen years old at the time) contains a thinly veiled suggestion of rape. That Barnes chooses not to depict Pocahontas in this way, in stark contrast to Custis’s Pocahontas (played by Barnes’s own mother), is indicative of her attempts to present Pocahontas as a subject rather than an object. It may also have had to do with the recent shift in American theater culture from a focus on the actor’s elocutionary skills to the privileging of spectacle. Melodrama was at the forefront of this shift, and as Dudden demonstrates, it often included displays of actress’s bodies for the male gaze (64). Having been raised by Shakespearean actors and having a passion for

dramatic poetics, Barnes created a role for herself, through her non-sexualized portrayal of Pocahontas, in which her own embodied performance as an actor on the stage resisted the trend of female objectification.

Barnes's depiction of Pocahontas's saving of Smith from execution—an event recorded in his *Generall Historie* that is likely inaccurate—differs substantially from that of Barker's and Custis's.³² Rather than serving as the climax of the play's action, this scene occurs in the first act of Barnes's play before Pocahontas even knows who Smith is. Her motivation for saving him is ethical and political rather than personal. She does not act out of love or admiration for Smith or Rolfe or Europeans generally but on the principle of just leadership. A far cry from Custis's bloodthirsty villain, Powhatan expresses that his death sentence for Smith is necessary because of the duplicitous and cruel treatment his people have received at the hands of the colonists who he fears will destroy his entire race. Pocahontas responds:

The voice of mercy louder speaks than Powhatan. . . .
And *should* our race thus pass from earth away,
The shame will not be theirs, but their oppressors',
Who then, amidst the chronicles they keep,
This act of mercy by a forest king
Full surely must record . . .
In mercy stay!
Perhaps he has a child in that far land—
A babe just straying from its mother's arms. (Barnes 1.3)

As Jaroff says of this scene, Pocahontas “engages her father in an intellectual argument about what makes a responsible ruler, suggesting that leniency and royal clemency best exemplify power” (490). This not only complicates the simulation of the accommodating Indian princess popular on the stage, it also challenges gender roles. Barnes makes this point clear in Pocahontas's objection to her father's assertion that, as a woman, it is not

her place to participate in the king's counsels: "True. / Poor Pocahontas is a woman, but / She's a child of a great warrior and king— / Of Powhatan—and, as she shares his blood, / So may she share his counsels" (1.3). The intellectual debate between daughter and father fails to resolve matters even as it makes clear Pocahontas's motivations for subsequently clasping Smith's head in her arms and covering him with her own body to prevent his execution. Scenes of such heightened physical action are necessary in melodrama, and this one demonstrates Pocahontas's virtuous heroism on a visceral level. Accordingly, Powhatan is moved to spare Smith, remarking of his daughter, "Thou art a worthy / daughter of thy race— / A warrior's spirit in a woman's form" (Barnes 1.3). Barnes associates Pocahontas's bravery with her racial identity. To do so, she imaginatively assigns a motivation and character type to Pocahontas that, while more respectful in comparison to other stage versions of the Indian princess, is nonetheless a simulation of Indian-ness manufactured by a white author. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the scene is how Barnes, through her embodied performance as well as her dialogue, illustrates that feminine sympathy and physical valor are not mutually exclusive.

In many regards, Barnes's most important intervention in the Pocahontas mythology is to include her captivity by the English, especially as it seems to be the only drama to include a representation of this actual occurrence in colonial history. Pocahontas comes to the fort at Jamestown to warn the English of her father's impending attack. As with her saving of Smith, her motivations and allegiances are complicated: "I claim / Your word to act as Pocahontas wills. / In peace and pity, slaughter to prevent, / I give this warning. But, whate'er betide, / Ye must attempt no strife. In mercy act; / Nor slay, nor *harm* the tribes of Powhatan" (Barnes 2.2). Once more motivated by the principles of

peace and mercy, Pocahontas acts to spare the colonists' lives, but she also maintains her loyalty to her own people. As the English are desperate with starvation and illness, Sir Thomas Dale decides to take Pocahontas captive and ransom her to Powhatan, much to the disappointment and anger of Rolfe. In her fiercest speech of the melodrama, Pocahontas charges the English with treachery and testifies to her unwavering loyalty to her people:

No policy
Doth Pocahontas know, save justice. She
Hath succored ye, for she believed ye friends.
But if your arms should e'er be leveled 'gainst
Her race, mark well: her country's foes are hers! . . .
Ye blame the red man, yet adopt his wiles.
Why do ye practice treachery, deceit,
Trampling on hospitable gratitude
By thus constraining me? Oh, shame! The stream
Of patriot love flows in my *father's* heart . . .
No such excuse
Is *yours*; for from the current of your souls
The tomahawk of ages has hewn down
All that impeded the pure light of heaven! (Barnes 2.2)

Pocahontas also rejects Dale's assertions that King James is her father. "Her threat to retaliate against the colonists' policy towards Indians, to make them her enemies, is startlingly incongruous with her traditional image as their steadfast protector," as Jaroff argues (492). This scene also casts Pocahontas in the melodramatic role typical for the virtuous heroines of melodrama who point to the hypocrisy and dissembling of guilty villainy. Pocahontas is eventually released when Powhatan comes to ransom her by signing a treaty with the English. Barnes's inclusion of her captivity and subsequent resistance oppose popular representations of the Indian princess as immediately and instinctively embracing English dominance. In contrast to Barker and Custis, Barnes

refuses to turn Pocahontas into a symbol of England's legitimate right to colonize North America.

The actual circumstances of Pocahontas's captivity, however, were far more egregious than Barnes's portrayal indicates. Ralph Hamor's *A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia* (1615) reports the capture of Pocahontas by Captain Samuel Argall from the English perspective. Argall tricked Pocahontas into coming aboard his ship although she was hesitant to do so and then held her there by force and brought her back to Jamestown. Supposedly, Powhatan refused to ransom her. A year into her captivity, the colonists used her as a decoy aboard a ship traveling the James River in order to bait the Powhatan. When the Powhatan warriors "let their arrowes flie," the English, "thus justly provoked," as Hamor maintains, "manned our boates, went ashoare, and burned in that verie place some forty houses, and of the things we found therein, made freeboote and pillage" (8). The English kept Pocahontas captive for three years according to Hamor. As Faery reminds us, "Narratives of white women's captivities rest, therefore, on precursor narratives of Native women's captivities" (16). This unsettling substitution, beginning with captivity narratives such as Rowlandson's, has shaped the Indian melodramas of the antebellum period, which is why Barnes's inclusion of Pocahontas's captivity is all the more significant. During her captivity, Pocahontas converted to Christianity, took the name Rebecca, married John Rolfe, and had a child. It is not difficult to surmise based on the English record that she may not have given her consent in these matters since she was being held against her will.

Even so, surmises are not necessary because the sacral oral history of the Mattaponi (Pocahontas's mother's people), as written by Dr. Linwood "Little Bear"

Custalow and Angela L. Daniel “Silver Star,” provides an account of these events from a Native American perspective. As a teenager, Pocahontas married Kocoum by choice and gave birth to their child (Custalow and Daniel 47).³³ As Hamor reports, Captain Samuel Argall took Pocahontas captive (Custalow and Daniel 47-50). Contrary to Hamor’s report, however, the Mattaponi state that Powhatan tried to ransom his daughter several times and the English accepted his offers but then neglected to free her (Custalow and Daniel 63-64). Meanwhile, they murdered her husband Kocoum (Custalow and Daniel 89). During her captivity, Pocahontas was raped and became pregnant, as she revealed to her kin when they were permitted to visit her at Jamestown. As Custalow and Daniel assert, “Mattaponi sacred oral history is very clear on this: Pocahontas was raped” (62). Her son, Thomas, was born prior to her marriage to Rolfe. The Mattaponi history does not specify who the father of her child was, but Custalow and Daniel posit that it may have been Sir Thomas Dale. Powhatan did not attempt to retrieve his daughter by force because he feared that the English would kill her if he attacked. During her captivity, she agreed to marry Rolfe. Upon request, Powhatan also sent his agreement, but considering what the alternatives may have been under such circumstances the agreement to marriage cannot be taken as free consent. In fact, Powhatan refused marriage proposals by the English to his other daughters who were not captives to the English. The Mattaponi say that this was the best option presented to Pocahontas during her captivity and that she attempted to make the best of her situation for the sake of her son and her people now that the Powhatan and the English shared a blood relative (Custalow and Daniel 65-66). Of course, Barnes had no access to the Mattaponi account of this history. She does, however, alter the information on Pocahontas’s captivity in the English record, lessening

its brutality and eliding any reference to rape or forced marriage. Her play may not have ever been produced or published otherwise, and her version comes closest to historical accuracy in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the version of captivity presented in Barnes's melodrama minimizes the violence of colonial history, particularly as it impacted Native women, enabling a simulation of the Indian princess as a consenting mediator—and mother—between two cultures.

This schema is made possible, in part, through the play's most melodramatic formulation, the villainizing of William Volday. Barnes's Volday, although Swiss, may be based on the "meere Imposter," the Dutchman Valda, who betrays the English to Powhatan in Smith's *Generall Historie*. Upon his first stage entrance, Volday has an aside in which he identifies himself as a hypocritical villain through self-nomination: "You [Rolfe] aided Smith in public to disgrace / My name. I *will* bear friendship—in my *looks*, / And wait the hour to crush ye both" (Barnes 1.2). In the second act, Volday plots against the starving colonists with Powhatan for his own advantage, aiming to oust Rolfe's and Smith's party so that he can live in "lawless luxury . . . And reign amidst these forests" (Barnes 2.1). Rolfe foils his devious plans in an exhilarating action sequence during which Volday is disarmed and publically recognized as a "Villain!" (Rolfe) and "Double traitor!" (Powhatan) (Barnes 2.1). While in England, Volday plots against Rolfe once more out of desperate vengeance, and Rolfe is nearly sentenced to death as a result. Mary Loeffelholz observes that Volday's villainy is what ties the plot of *The Forest Princess* together, sending the message that "only a monstrous European would imagine becoming Indian, only a saintly Indian maiden could become an English lady" (65). Similar to Stone's *Metamora*, Barnes's play displaces the guilt for colonial

violence onto a European aristocrat (this time not even an English one), blunting any criticism that could be made of the more famous Smith and Rolfe, who are glorified as virtuous heroes within the polarizing scheme of the melodrama's Manicheanism.

The marriage between Pocahontas and Rolfe in *The Forest Princess* is portrayed differently than it is in Barker's and Custis's plays but still posits marriage as a symbolic union between two peoples. The most important aspect of the marriage in Barnes's melodrama is the emphasis placed on agency and choice. Having had the time to get to know Rolfe, Pocahontas marries him for love, and Powhatan gives his daughter the choice to marry whomever she pleases. Therefore, Pocahontas does not rebel against her father to join the English, and her subjective agency is preserved. Custis presents the marriage as a means of legitimizing both the theft of Native lands and white European dominance through the objectification of the Indian woman. Barker's Pocahontas has more agency than Custis's, but her rebellious choice to marry Rolfe is tied to the playwright's assumption of white superiority. Barnes, on the other hand, envisions a scenario in which Pocahontas chooses to marry Rolfe without betraying any allegiance to her own people. Rather than legitimizing imperial violence, Barnes envisions intermarriage with the mutual consent of both partners as a humane alternative to race war. Melodramatic convention underscores the moral import of such a vision as the marriage scene ends in tableau.

Barnes is the only dramatist to feature Pocahontas's travels to England, which is the topic of the mostly fictionalized third and final act. Volday falsely convinces the English crown that Rolfe is involved in a plot to betray their interests in the Virginia colony. As a result, Rolfe is thrown in prison and awaits the judgment of the king. Sick

and dying, Pocahontas musters the strength to save her husband in a diplomatic intervention to Queen Anne and Prince Charles, whom she begs to intercede with King James on Rolfe's behalf. As Jaroff asserts, the third act is designed to "underscore [Pocahontas's] heroism and elevate her to martyr" while demonstrating her unshakable faith in humanitarian action over patriarchal rule (499). Pocahontas's arguments to Prince Charles are similar to those she makes to Powhatan in her earlier opposition to Smith's execution: "The thought that thou has e'er the wretched soothed, / Redressed a wrong, protected virtue—cheered, / Sustained the weak—will more avail thee *then* / Than all the thousands who thy crowning hail / With, 'Long live Charles the First!'" (Barnes 3.4). Her repeated emphasis on the importance of mercy to just leadership forms a parallel between the first and third acts and between Prince Charles and Powhatan. Each ruler is criticized for his lack of mercy but the English even more so because they merely end up pardoning Rolfe who is one of their own instead of changing their colonial policies, whereas Powhatan changes his entire approach to the English colonists invading his land. Another key aspect unique to Barnes's play is that her intervention is associated with her motherhood. In giving birth to Thomas Rolfe, Pocahontas becomes the literal and figural mother of an interracial or creolized American identity, perhaps drawing upon but also re-imagining Barker's figuration of Pocahontas as the foster mother to white America. Stoner comments on Barnes's radical choice to give Pocahontas's "mestizo" child a role in the play, noting that it would likely have been unpalatable to white audiences of the time (513). Pocahontas's political interventions position her as a matriarch whose benevolent vision opposes and mitigates patriarchal domination, which the play represents as deeply connected to imperial violence. However, this is somewhat undercut

by Pocahontas's death and the subsequent raising of Thomas by white Englishmen. In this sense, Barnes's depictions lean more towards an assimilationist approach rather than embracing a truly multi-racial/multi-cultural American identity.

In the melodrama's resolution, Pocahontas dies a sentimentalized death and has a prophetic vision that resolves colonial conflict through a problematic substitution. The final scene details the afflicted pain of Pocahontas's death, depicting her as a martyr for peace between the Old World and the New World. The scene continues Pocahontas's subjective agency by giving her the final speech of the play and having Rolfe refer to her once more by her original Native name as opposed to her baptismal name, Rebecca. As she perishes, she sees before her the landscape of her Native home in Virginia. As Jaroff argues, such a death infuses Pocahontas's character with sentimentalized power as it "reveals her ultimate superiority to the earthbound men who would usurp her place," much in the same way that Tompkins argues regarding the death of Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (501). Yet the resolution also contains a prophetic vision of America's future that is staged in melodramatic fashion through an allegoric pantomime set to music. It features the figure of Powhatan awaiting his daughter's arrival on the shores that are now home to Indian wigwams and colonial forts alike. Clouds obscure Powhatan as the figures of Time and Peace cross the stage to reveal the form of George Washington in their train. Washington, as a national father figure, thus takes the place of Pocahontas's actual father, Powhatan, in her vision. Upon awakening,

Pocahontas exclaims:

No, 'tis no dream! . . .
Souls of the prophet-fathers of my race,
Light from the land of spirits have ye sent

To paint the future on my mental sight.
Like the great river of far western wilds,
Improvement's course, unebbing, shall flow on.
From that beloved soil where I drew breath
Shall noble chiefs arise. But one o'er all,
By heaven named to set a nation free,
I hear the universal world declare,
In shouts whose echo centuries prolong,
'The Father of this Country!' O'er the path
Of ages, I behold Time leading Peace. (Barnes 3.5)

Pocahontas is acutely aware of her place on the stage of history, as is her father. Her vision and speech here are structurally parallel to a speech given by her father in the first act of the play. In his vision of the future, Powhatan foresees:

The time will come they'll [i.e. the colonists] spread o'er all the land.
Foul tyranny and rapine they'll return
For friendly welcome and sweet mercy shown,
Defrauding or exterminating still
Our ancient race, until the red man's name
Will live but in the memory of the past,
Or in some exile powerless, who sells
For a few ears of corn his father's land,
Lord of that soil where then he'll beg a grave. (Barnes 1.3)

Much like Washington, as a father figure, is substituted for Powhatan in Pocahontas's vision of "Improvement's course," so does her closing speech on America's glorious future displace and supplant her father's earlier vision of colonial genocide and de-territorialization. The result is similar to the patch or faux resolution we see in *Metamora* in which white Americans imbibe the best qualities of the noble Indian (as they are imagined by a white author) thereby paving the way for the progress of republican freedom. In effect, Pocahontas's vision is presented as one that sees beyond Powhatan's and, in so doing, imagines a version of colonial history in which diplomatic compromise and merciful assimilation seemingly resolve the conflicts of imperialist violence. Even as

Barnes offers a pointed challenge to contemporary removal policies, her contradictory resolution mitigates its political potency. However, this framework is part of the melodramatic ritual within which the play operates to stage a contested simulation of feminized Indian identity that is not so easily contained by this paradoxical moral resolution.

In authoring *The Forest Princess*, Barnes created a dynamic female role that she intended to play herself. She did so at a time when acting as a woman on stage brought censure to an even greater degree than being a published writer since acting required one to leave the domestic sphere and come before the public eye in person. Yet professional acting also presented women with unique opportunities. As Dudden articulates:

‘Acting female’ is what traditionalists and reactionaries prescribe for women, but an ‘acting female’—a woman who plays roles—reveals the possibility of escaping that imperative. Whenever a woman enacts a part she implicitly threatens the prevailing definition of womanhood: she shows she can become someone and make you believe it. The very project the actress engages in undermines assumptions about the fixity of identity. . . . Thus the discrepancy between seeming and being that is intrinsic to theatre whispers to women about transformation, self-creation, even power. (2)

As an experienced actor who had played a variety of roles, both masculine and feminine, Barnes put this possibility into practice. In the case of *The Forest Princess*, “playing Indian” gave Barnes the freedom to act outside the strictures of nineteenth-century gender roles as they were proscribed for white middle-class women. Not unlike the Tammany Societies of the revolutionary era, Barnes staged a ritual performance of herself in Indian costume that symbolized the indigenization of white Americans. Instead of turning the Indian into a symbol for land rights and popular sovereignty in order to challenge English rule as the Tammanys did, Barnes’s simulation transforms the Indian princess into a

figure for female independence and heroic motherhood that presents a challenge to patriarchal dominance. While *The Forest Princess* should be noted for its revisionist approach to colonial history and popular Indian melodrama, Barnes's performance is red-faced nevertheless and, even if unintentionally, obscures colonial relations with its assimilationist and surrogate version of American nationhood.

As far as the historical record indicates, there were no melodramas penned by Native American authors in antebellum America. Native American performance, however, was a visible and integral part of American culture. In public appearances, oratories, ritual demonstrations, and treaty councils, Native Americans performed their identities for white audiences. Sometimes these performances were controlled by Euro-Americans. For instance, after his defeat in a war that sought to preserve Native lands and traditional ways of life, the Sauk leader Black Hawk was captured by U.S. forces and, along with other Sauk prisoners of war, was brought on a tour of prominent American cities. On 6 June 1833, Black Hawk was conveyed to see a play at the Front Street Theatre in Baltimore where President Andrew Jackson was also in attendance, and "the attention of the house was very equally divided between them" (Odell 3.680). While such exhibitions of Black Hawk were designed to signify the inevitable defeat of Native Americans, his embodied presence also contradicted the notion of disappearance and was a forceful reminder of Native resistance.

At other times, Native Americans opposed dominant representations of "Indian-ness" through alternative self-representations. One such alternative representation was made by the Cherokee leader John Ross in response to a performance of Custis's *Pocahontas* in Washington, D.C. at the National Theatre on 6 February 1836. At the

same time that *Pocahontas* was playing, Ross was in D.C. with a delegation of Cherokee to protest the removal policies of Jackson's administration. In her exploration of theater culture in antebellum America, Rosemarie K. Bank provides a detailed explanation of these events as they were reported in the periodicals of the day:

The fifth representation of Mr. Custis's splendid melodrama *Pocahontas* brought together a very large audience, the interest of which was increased by the introduction of John Ross and his 'merrie men,' who performed their real Indian war dance, exhibiting hate, triumph, revenge, etc., and went through the agreeable ceremony of scalping, all of which seemed to give great satisfaction to a crowded house. The white men forming the *dramatis personae* were determined not to be outdone by their red allies, and their exertions were so effective that the whole went off with much eclat. (*Globe* qtd. in Bank, *Theatre Culture* 66)

A few days later, a new report was made in which Ross refuted the notion that they had been involved in the performance:

Among the theatrical communications thrust into our columns without our knowledge was one saying that 'John Ross and his merrie men performed their real Indian war dance,' etc. We believe some such notice was also contained in the playbills. We have received a letter from Mr. Ross in which he says that 'neither I nor any of my associates of the Cherokee delegation have appeared on the stage. We have been occupied with matters of graver import than to become the allies of white men forming the *dramatis personae*. We have too high a regard for ourselves—too deep an interest in the welfare of our people, to be merry-making under our misfortunes,' etc. (*Globe* qtd. in Bank, *Theatre Culture* 68)

The desire of the white theater management to present the Cherokee as "allies" in a melodramatic performance that idealizes the drama of conquest through romanticized and villainized simulations of the Indian belies their attempts to control the representation of race through imitation. That Ross latches onto the word "allies" is telling since Custis's play portrays Pocahontas precisely as the willing ally of white colonial domination. Refusing to lend any credibility to such a representation, Ross stages an alternative

performance of Cherokee resistance as one of far more importance and gravity with its insistence on making visible the real suffering of Native peoples that continued throughout the nineteenth century.

Simulations of Indians were not restricted to Native-white relations. As Dillon explains, the African Grove Theatre, the first black theater company in New York City, produced Sheridan's melodrama *Pizzaro* several times under the direction of African-American producer-playwright William Alexander Brown with the famous African-American actors James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge playing the Inca warrior Rolla (223). Arguing against an interpretation of such performances as instances of black indigenization designed to legitimize land rights and popular sovereignty for New World Africans, Dillon posits that W. A. Brown's productions actually linked anti-colonial and anti-racist sentiments. She cites W. A. Brown's original play *The Drama of King Shotaway* (1822), about the slave insurrection of Black Caribs (descendants of Carib Indians and African Maroon slaves) on St. Vincent, and his adaptation of *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack* (1823), about the slave uprising in Jamaica led by the Maroon folk hero Jack Mansong, as additional examples.³⁴ W. A. Brown was from the West Indies and the productions at the Grove represent this heritage. Dillon explains how these plays portrayed:

[R]esistance to colonization [as] the shared work of native peoples and escaped slaves who have banded together in opposition to the extractive plantation economy that appropriates both land and labor for European profit. . . . an indigenization that aims less to eradicate native peoples in the name of anti-colonial nationalism than to eradicate a colonial relation to land and labor. (244)

Such portrayals at the Grove were perhaps similar, then, to the connections drawn by Apess in his *Eulogy* between slavery, genocide, and de-territorialization as conjunctively resulting in the degradation of not only Native Americans but also colored people collectively (304). These connections zero in on the variegated parts of the colonial machine.

It is no coincidence, then, that simulations of black identity circulated through the colonial Atlantic world to the same extent that simulations of Indian identity did, ranging from tortured African princes like Oroonoko to blackface minstrel caricatures like Jim Crow. In the period of melodrama's rise on the early national stage, glorified colonial founders, welcoming Indian princesses, diabolical Indian warriors, suffering slaves, and minstrelized dandies lent themselves to melo-dramatizations designed to tell the story of a new democratic republic yet barely concealed the colonial relations that continued to shape American history and culture. While *Metamora*, *Nick*, *Telie*, and *Pocahontas* moved audiences to tears and excitements, Native American peoples were violently forced off their lands and cotton plantations fueled by slave labor rapidly took their place.

PART TWO

THE MATURATION OF AMERICAN MELODRAMA: SENSATIONALIZED SUFFERING AND SLAVERY PLAYS OF THE 1850s

Chattel slavery has a long history of representation on the stage in the circum-Atlantic world of the colonial era—ranging from Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko* (1695) to the many versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* played in the 1850s. From condemnation to celebration to caricature and back again, dramatizations of slavery offered various responses to the traumatic socio-political crises engendered by the “peculiar institution.” Melodrama, in particular, was central in providing a popular venue for probing the conflicts of this polarizing system. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the history of melodrama is bound to the history of slavery. Even the earliest melo-dramatists engaged with slavery in establishing a foundation for the new dramatic form. For example, René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt and August von Kotzebue both wrote slavery melodramas in 1793, *Sélico ou les Nègres Généreux* and *Die Negersclaven*, respectively. Melodramatic stagings of slavery plays proliferated from this historical moment onwards. Looking at all of these plays together, “[they] seem to provide an encyclopaedic portrait of the history of slavery throughout the Atlantic basin” (Van Kooy and Cox 460). As a spectacular and sentimentalized form, melodrama lent itself especially well to expressing

the emotionally loaded signifiers tied to slavery in the American social consciousness. Central to the melodramatic representation of slavery was the sensationalized suffering of virtuous black characters. Of the forty-some slavery plays performed on American soil between 1787 and 1861, a predominant number featured just such representations of black identity, particularly as melodrama solidified into a dominant cultural form in America by the 1850s (Lawson 28).

As was also the case with theatrical icons of Indian identity, theatrical icons of blackness circulated around the colonies and metropolises of the Atlantic rim, providing early melodrama with ready material. Even as these Indian and black simulations presented distinct cultural types, they often overlapped in their meanings, always connected by the colonial realities tied to their mimetic representations. Images of the African slave that denoted colonial relationships were increasingly transformed into symbols of the new nation as America established itself as an independent republic. This performance history is indicative of the fact that national identities depended evermore so on newly constructed socio-legal distinctions between races of people in a democracy that privileged only Euro-American men as citizens. In the words of Dillon:

In order for the white creole to become an (indigenous) white national, histories of settler colonialism and Atlantic race slavery are both evoked and erased by means of renewed and revised performances of the Indian King (D'Avenant's tortured Inca prince . . . becomes Edwin Forrest's *Metamora*) and the royal African slave (Southerne's Oroonoko becomes T.D. Rice's *Jim Crow*). (222)

A cursory glance at the dramatic performances circulating in the colonial and early national periods paints a picture of an Atlantic theater world teeming with simulations of blackness that reflect these representational shifts.

Beginning with the captivity of a prince in Africa and ending with the sundering of a slave family on New World soil, *Oroonoko* presented London and New York audiences with a tragically sympathetic version of the royal African slave throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the same time, George Colman's *Inkle and Yarico* (1787), which debuted in New York City in 1791, popularized the alluring "mulatta" figure. Played in blackface, Yarico was indeterminately West Indian, perhaps Afro-Caribbean or indigenous Native or both, but decidedly sexualized and subservient, a conflation of the feminized simulations of Indian and black identity that were used to "justify" imperialist dominance. Adaptations of Shakespeare added to the picture with versions of *Othello* playing throughout the North American colonies (and subsequently states). As Heather S. Nathans explains, these competing versions of *Othello* sent contentious messages about the immoral impropriety of miscegenation, the supposed sexual aggression and violent tendencies of black men, and the heroic capabilities of a rebellious black leader devoted to his people (185-186). In colonies where the black African/Caribbean population greatly outnumbered the white Anglo/French/Spanish population, such as Charleston and St. Domingue, productions of *Oroonoko* were banned and pantomime versions of *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* featured harlequin blackface Calibans and Fridays who staged carefully controlled versions of a polysemous black identity that was transforming itself under the force of colonial power relations (Dillon 147-164). As America broke the yoke of British rule and Haitian slaves won their independence and England started to abolish its slave trade, the United States began to define itself in relation to nationalist sentiment and the economics of westward

expansion, as opposed to the intricate trading networks linking North American and Caribbean colonies.

Accordingly, US performances of black identity were transmuted into national types that concealed (yet still retained) the colonial relations of recent Atlantic history. John Murdock's *The Triumphs of Love; or, Happy Reconciliation* (1794) expressed the growing antislavery sentiment in Philadelphia by bringing the eroticized, sentimentalized, suffering slave body before the northern public eye in the first staging of a slave emancipation (Nathans 43-50). The sympathetic identification Murdock orchestrated would be replicated and solidified throughout the antebellum period in antislavery melodramas that turned the slave into a figure of national redemption. Conversely, Maria Pinckney's *The Young Carolinians* (1818) staged a popular southern defense of slavery through simulations of blackness as inherently ahistorical, docile, juvenile and therefore dependent on the white paternalistic rule of the American South. Such a representation proliferated in the minstrel performances that were so integral to antebellum melodramas. Amidst these dominant colonial and early national representations of race, New World Africans created and performed dissenting versions of black identity. In Kingston, Jamaica, for instance, Afro-Caribbeans performed in Jonkonnu street parades, appropriating the signs of white social control through elaborate costuming and mocking antics (Dillon 196-214). In 1820s New York City, W. A. Brown produced original dramas and adaptations at the African Grove Theatre that celebrated the heroes of slave rebellions and showcased the sophisticated eloquence of black Shakespearean actors. By midcentury, melodrama had developed into its fully matured form, and it was increasingly at the forefront of America's obsession with staging embodied performances

of race that jived with US nationalism. This was because it provided an effective framework for Americans seeking to define themselves through contentious representations of race within the performative commons.

The turbulent 1850s were the breeding ground for the intensification and propagation of melodramatic conceptions of slavery, particularly as the growing antislavery movement sought to convey its messages through popular forms. Numerous controversies, such as the Compromise of 1850 and Bleeding Kansas, fueled regional tensions amidst the tumultuous social change encapsulated in the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls and the working class riot at the Astor Place Theatre. Social structures and cultural identities were in great flux. "In a highly volatile Atlantic theatre world obsessed with racial and gender transfigurations and slippage" (D. A. Brooks 29), melodrama assigned moral meaning to the institution at the center of America's conflicts. As Nathans observes, events like the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 ushered in a new era that "foregrounded the suffering of the slave" as abolitionists "treated the slave as a *symbol* for the sins and suffering of the nation" (74-80). This is evident in Harriet Beecher Stowe's hugely popular and influential novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), with its many stage adaptations, including George Aiken's and Henry J. Conway's highly melodramatized versions (1852). Situating *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the source of America's melodramatic treatment of race, Williams asserts, "From the moment Simon Legree's whip first lent Uncle Tom a paradoxical visibility and dignity as a suffering, and thus worthy, human being, the political power of pain and suffering has been a key mechanism of melodrama's rhetorical power" (43). We must look to the slavery plays of

the 1850s to understand the ways in which racialized identities have been and continue to be shaped by a melodramatic framework in America.

What did this format look like on the American stage of the 1850s? As Saidiya Hartman describes, “Melodrama provided the dramatic frame that made the experience of slavery meaningful . . . in terms of the moral imagination” (27). That is, melodrama’s interpretive worldview, which is rooted in a clear sense of good and evil, offered narratives about slavery that signified right and wrong through suffering victimry and sinister villainy. In establishing moral legibility, melodrama relies on Manichean structures and highly exaggerated, non-verbal, bodily gestures that express truths beyond language’s signifying capacity. At a time when frustrations over the entanglement of slavery with various political agendas ran high, the power of the body proved a successful means of emotional expression. A representation of black identity rooted in the sensationalized suffering of the body—the brutal whipping of Uncle Tom, the terror of Zoe on the auction block—moved audiences to sympathize with slave characters and recognize their inherent virtue. This, in turn, played up a Manichean logic that continues to underpin racialized representations of blackness in the dominant culture. The “aesthetics of muteness”—the use of pantomime, gesture, and tableau—are vital to staging this contested moral legibility, the emotional power of the suffering slave always in excess of the linguistic signifier. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the grand tableaux that punctuate the end of almost every act in slavery melodramas (the scenes featuring Uncle Tom and Zoe are prime examples). This emotional identification with the slave had the potential to provoke dissent against the chattel institution. Yet

melodramatic form often restores order by relying on existing social structures, sometimes the very structures that made slavery possible.

This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that minstrelsy, with its stereotyped, racist caricatures, was integral to melodramatic performance—as illustrated extensively in the works of Eric Lott, Hartman, and Williams.³⁵ Thus two cultural phenomena conjoined on the antebellum stage as minstrelsy swept the nation, testifying to melodrama’s uncanny ability to incorporate new cultural forms into itself. Nearly all black characters in melodrama were played by white actors in blackface, and the suffering slave is no less a masked simulation of blackness than the minstrel type. As Hartman aptly phrases it, “black characters bearing a striking resemblance to Zip Coon, Jim Crow, and Black Rose, the bumbling, loyal, and childish Sambos and wenches of minstrelsy, provided the comic b(l)ackdrop of virtue's triumph” (28). Melodrama’s contradictory resolutions and reliance on racist stereotypes call into question the extent to which it may have functioned as a vehicle for social change.

Yet it is also important to note that minstrelsy, even with its vicious racism, was conflicted in its racial representations. Dillon convincingly traces the development of minstrel caricature in the responses of white colonists and nationalists to African performance strategies of resistance. Afro-Caribbean Jonkonnu performers in Kingston dressed in elaborate costumes that can be seen as early figurations of a dissenting black dandy who appropriates the silk and muslin of the plantocratic ruling elite as a counter to the stripping of slaves’ social identities symbolized by the bare, cheap linens they were forced to wear. In their dress and their mocking antics, Jonkonnu performers wearing white masks expressed subversive contempt for their European oppressors, often staging

adapted versions of popular dramas like Shakespeare's *Richard III*. As Dillon shows, white planters in Kingston interpreted Jonkonnu performance as a laughable attempt on the part of black slaves to imitate their white superiors, and so they began to circulate derisive images of blackness that maintained racial hierarchies through degraded imitation (202-210). The duplicitous slave Mungo in Isaac Bickerstaff's comic opera *The Padlock* (1768), a popular sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, bears a striking resemblance to the costumed Jonkonnu performers; he is also the first black-faced character to speak in the caricatured New World dialect that would become a hallmark of minstrelsy's racism (Dillon 211).

Similarly, the first Shakespearean performances at W. A. Brown's African Grove Theatre, which were played to mixed-race audiences, drew derisive attention from New York's white elite, including the melo-dramatist Mordecai Noah who mocked the African Company's production of *Richard III* as a poor imitation of white eloquence in the press. The debate (and riots) over the right of blacks to own, operate, and attend the theater reveals white anxieties about black political power, for citizens like Noah worried over the connections between the formation of a black performative commons at the Grove and the possibility of black enfranchisement (Dillon 228-229). As Samuel A. Hay and Marvin McAllister discuss, Noah's contemptuous reporting of the Grove performances through caricatured black dialect gained wide cultural traction and likely contributed to the derisive black-faced imitations of whiteness that became so characteristic of the minstrel show (Hay 13; McAllister 150-166). Not long after these events, Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice first jumped Jim Crow in blackface at a production of *Richard III* (Dillon 215-218). Jim Crow and Zip Coon (the minstrel plantation "darker" and black

dandy respectively), then, can be seen as national substitutions for prior colonial simulations of blackness:

Placing Jim Crow in a performance lineage with Oroonoko as well as the Jonkonnu Actor Boy underscores the way in which Jim Crow's performance of US national blackness circumscribes and overwrites an earlier diasporic history in which blackness had a more extensive lineage and geography—and far more multivalent cultural meanings—than it would come to have in the racialized landscape of the mid-nineteenth-century United States. (Dillon 220)

Even as minstrelsy erases the colonial relations that had shaped New World African identity, it contains concealed remnants of this past history, which helps to explain why blackface was such a fraught performance in antebellum America.

Some minstrel shows contained subversive elements, hinted that both blackness and whiteness were performed rather than essentialist identities, and even suggested sentiments of cross-racial solidarity—as David Roediger, Lott, Dale Cockrell, and W.T. Lhamon have shown.³⁶ This helps to explain why the antislavery movement incorporated and appropriated elements of the minstrel show into their productions, including their slavery melodramas. Frederick Douglass's comments illustrate abolitionism's ambiguous relationship to the minstrel tradition. In the *North Star*, he writes that minstrels were “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens,” while he later admits in a lecture:

[It] would seem almost absurd to say it, considering the use that has been made of them, that we have allies in the Ethiopian songs. . . . They are heart songs, and the finest feelings of human nature are expressed in them. ‘Lucy Neal,’ ‘Old Kentucky Home,’ and ‘Uncle Ned’ . . . can call forth a tear as well as a smile. They awaken the sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root, grow and flourish. (Douglass qtd. in McClendon 86-87)

With its focus on the body and music, minstrelsy contentiously blended with melodrama, sometimes providing a humorous counterpoint to the pathos of the suffering slave body and at other times reinforcing such imagery.

As melodrama is a form that hinges on unspoken means of expression and privileges the body as the site of that expression, it is not surprising that the black body takes center stage in melodramas about slavery. This reflects a larger cultural movement that increasingly looked to individual bodies as a means of constructing conceptions of the body politic. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler contends, “the development of a political discourse and a concept of personhood that attests to the centrality of the body erupt throughout antebellum culture” (1). Melodrama’s representations of racialized bodies help constitute the creation of “phenomenal blackness,” as theorized by Harvey Young. As Young explains, “When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of *the black body*. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one” (7). The racializing projections of melodrama, featuring whipped-scarring and auction blocks, force the black body into public view and, within that space, assign moral registers to its suffering that continue to influence the construction of “phenomenal blackness” in America today. This is why an examination of the varied proliferations of the melodramatic black body of the antebellum period is so important. While Young emphasizes the dangers of making an embodied abstraction stand for a larger group, Carol E. Henderson argues for “the ability of the body to alter certain historical moments in any given social milieu,” noting that America’s “historical record is replete with

examples of the body being used successfully by various ethnic groups as a tool to challenge the stifling conditions of economic and social oppression” (3). Young’s and Henderson’s points about representations of the black body both resonate with melodramatic depictions of race. While the sensationalized suffering of some slavery melodramas creates a “phenomenal blackness” rooted in victimized innocence, other plays use the black body as a means of reinventing African American subjectivity.

Accordingly, critics have debated the effects of melodramatic conventions rooted in the sensationalized suffering of black characters. For instance, Melinda Lawson contends that while pre-1840s plays had portrayed slaves as intelligent schemers and heroic rebels, melodrama and minstrelsy combined to render slaves as suffering victims and “foolish imbeciles” with no agency (28). Dana Van Kooy and Jeffrey Cox add that the “spectacles of slaves . . . might seem to pose radical questions about the order of things, but . . . such spectacles are displaced by a restoration of domestic and national order” (463). In her deep investigation of the spectacle of violence and suffering, Hartman illustrates the overwhelming tendency for sympathetic identification to require the spectator to imagine the slave’s anguish as their own, which results in the obliteration of the other and the substitution of the self in their place. On the other hand, Lisa Merrill asserts that “for those spectators who transcended voyeurism, narcissism, or pity,” sympathetic identification could be a “transformative experience” leading to social action (142). Others, such as Lauren Berlant, have argued that the pathos of suffering did not expunge the identity of the other but rather established a new, if problematic, conceptualization of selfhood within sentimental culture that relied upon the individual’s capacity for suffering as a means of recognizing their status as citizens. Williams stresses

that for white audiences in the 1850s the torment of slave bodies on stage was vital to the recognition of their humanity and thus helped to fuel societal change, though she also shows how easily this melodramatic formation can be flipped on its head to villainize black characters and construct whites as innocent victims—either approach can obscure the complex identities of individuals. Likewise, she indicates that some racial melodramas condemn racism and others promote white supremacy. While the effects of melodramatic character formations are hotly debated, the lasting impact they have had on American understandings of race is undeniable.

Given such an impact, the subsequent chapters explore how slavery melodramas of the 1850s established dramatic conventions, racial identities, and conflict resolutions that (in conjunction with Indian plays) helped lay the groundwork for dominant racial significations after America had transformed from colony to nation. Aside from the numerous, thorough studies of the influential *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, very few scholars have engaged in an extended analysis of the many other slavery melodramas circulating at this formative period in American theater history. Yet it is only when we look at different kinds of slavery melodramas together that we begin to see a fuller picture of the racial identities performed on the stage. The fact is that playwrights deployed the conventions of melodramatic suffering and minstrel entertainment in different ways. What's more, they bent the paradoxical resolutions of melodrama to different purposes. So, while it is true that most slavery melodramas relied to some extent on existing socio-political structures to restore domestic and political order, the playwrights chose different structures for their resolutions depending on how they conceived of racial tensions and conflicts. Considering these plays in relation to one another, they can be seen as a series

of culturally specific processes in action that offer contesting identities and ideologies as a part of melodrama's prolific search for moral legibility.

What Susan Gillman writes of late-nineteenth century race melodramas in prose fiction is also true for those on the stage of the 1850s: "Far, then, from providing simply the sense of order associated with the formulaic conclusion of the melodrama, the race melodrama acknowledges, even embraces, everything that is most unsettling about the period and its cultural expression" (225). As I argue below, the performances of race that lend themselves to melodrama's tireless search for moral legibility are contradictory and complex. Enacting rituals of identity formation that encompass the tumultuous dissonance inherent to a nationalist discourse of racial essentialism, slavery melodramas simulate versions of phenomenal blackness (and whiteness) in response to the slipperiness of American identities shaped by colonialism's legacy. Some slavery melodramas stage intricate processes of erasure and purgation to provide faux solutions to racial indeterminacies, while others embrace the equivocations of racial significations through fraught embodied performances in order to pronounce moral condemnation. The plays examined here are illustrative, and while they do not exhaust the various types of slavery melodramas, they do provide a more nuanced picture of the diverse approaches to this important subgenre than is typically accounted for by critics. In demonstrating the versatility of slavery melodramas, I show how racialized melodramatic conventions rooted in sensationalized suffering and paradoxical resolutions enable performances of contestation, further illuminating a chief mode of cultural expression central to conceptions of race in America.

CHAPTER FOUR

A POPULIST APPROACH: SENSATIONALIZED SUFFERING IN DION

BOUCICAULT'S *THE OCTOROON*

Upon its theatrical release, Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* (1859) captivated the public imagination with the sensation of its action scenes and the pathos of its mixed-race heroine. As an Irish-born dramatist who began his career in London and performed in Paris before moving and setting up company in the United States, Boucicault was keenly familiar with the tastes of transatlantic theater audiences and the increasing demand for melodrama. Developing and perfecting a melodramatic form popular on both sides of the Atlantic, he became one of the nineteenth century's most well-known and important actor-playwright-managers. Like Louisa Medina, he was especially adept at crafting spectacular scenes of action, such as the explosion of the steamboat in *The Octoroon*, against which he staged melodramatic battles between good and evil, heightening viewers' emotional engagement with his plays' moral dilemmas. In 1859, after taking over management of the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City, Boucicault staged *The Octoroon*, a play he had written after an extended stay in New Orleans and had based loosely on Mayne Reid's novel of the same title (1856). Like many of his plays, *The Octoroon* deals with the specificities of its cultural environment as

well as the most pressing current issues, in this case, slavery and race politics. In fact, the play was released only a couple of days after the execution of John Brown, the white abolitionist who raided Harpers Ferry in an attempt to start an armed slave revolt by seizing a U.S. arsenal. A blockbuster success, the drama went on to play in several other American venues and overseas in London.³⁷

The drama pivots on two lines of action, both of which are constructed around a suffering character of mixed-race identity. The first and more prominent features Zoe, the octoroon of the melodrama's title played by the famous Agnes Robertson (Boucicault's wife), who is the illegitimate daughter of the late Judge Peyton and his quadroon slave. Mrs. Peyton treats Zoe as her adopted daughter and the Peytons' nephew-heir, George, falls in love with her not realizing that she is a slave of mixed-race parentage, which prevents their marriage. Further complicating matters, a Yankee interloper, M'Closky, has orchestrated the family's ruin by causing their bankruptcy. He covets Zoe and schemes to buy her when the Peytons are forced to auction off the Terrebonne plantation with all of its slaves, leading to Zoe's suicide (Zoe does not die in Reid's novel). The second plotline, entirely original, revolves around Paul, also a "mulatto" slave of the Peytons, who is murdered by M'Closky because he has possession of documents that will save the Peytons from bankruptcy. Wahnotee, Paul's devoted Indian friend (played by Boucicault himself), stalks M'Closky, eventually killing the villain in revenge. In the end, George reclaims possession of Terrebonne. Boucicault ingeniously weaves together the tropes of the "tragic mulatta" with those of the mortgage melodrama, as Roach has noted (218). The "tragic mulatta" story centers on an ill-fated, mixed-race woman who is claimed as a slave, while the mortgage melodrama focuses on the financial ruin and

dispossession of a respectable middle-class family. Boucicault uses a dynamic of sensationalized suffering to combine these two popular subgenres into one story, which he then builds into a performance of innocent victimry and wicked villainy that stages a contentious moral legibility regarding the conflicts of slavery.

The approach proved successful, as the play was an absolute sensation, similar to its predecessor, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Unlike the latter, however, Boucicault's play was not as clear with its take on slavery and ended up polarizing audiences, which only added to its hype. While viewers with southern loyalties appreciated its villainous portrayal of the Yankee and its indulgence of the idealized plantation lifestyle, abolitionist activists and sympathizers valued its moving representation of a virtuous heroine driven to destruction by the slave system (Lawson 45-46). Contemporaneous theater reviewers disagreed on Boucicault's intentions when it came to the "peculiar institution," and the case has been no different for more recent critics. It seems likely, however, that Boucicault purposely avoided siding one way or the other with his play in order to attract as many theatergoers as possible. As Merrill points out, a New York advertisement for the play quoted Virgil, "Tros Tyriusve mihi nullo discrimine agetur" (Trojan or Carthaginian, it makes no difference to me), to indicate that the play was not taking sides on the issue (85). Joseph Jefferson, a famous actor who played Salem Scudder in the play, said that it was "non-committal. The dialogue and characters of the play made one feel for the South, but the action proclaimed against slavery" (214). In its assessment, the *New York Times* agreed, emphasizing that it was a sensation regardless: "Everybody talks about *The Octoroon*, wonders about *The Octoroon*, goes to see *The Octoroon*, and thus *The Octoroon* becomes . . . the work of the public mind" ("The Octoroon" 4).

As a “work of the public mind,” Boucicault’s play taps into a representation of black identity rooted in bodily suffering that already weighed heavily in the socio-political consciousness of American audiences. In evoking audience sympathy and positioning the audience as witnesses to the staging of moral virtue inherent to such suffering character formations, Boucicault enabled their participation in a ritualized form of theater that provided a semblance of moral clarity on the troubling institution threatening to rip apart the nation. While the play hinges on the suffering of slaves, it actually does nothing to challenge the system of slavery itself, a feat Boucicault manages through an adept manipulation of melodrama’s paradoxical resolutions. While substantial critical attention has been given to Zoe’s hybrid identity, far less has been paid to Boucicault’s original storyline featuring the mixed-race slave Paul and his friend Wahnotee. My analysis examines the parallels between these two lines of action in order to show how Boucicault’s moral assignments are more complex than they otherwise appear given the destabilizing potentialities presented by Paul and Wahnotee’s homoerotic alliance. This approach reveals the melodrama’s anxious preoccupation with the relationship between the dispossession of Native Americans and the expropriation of African slave labor—a relationship that accounts for the prevalence of Indian and slavery melodramas in the antebellum period. The moral resolution Boucicault provides, while effectively erasing the destabilizing hybridizations created by colonial relations, is patchwork at best but probably deliberately so. The fact that the play appealed to audiences on polar ends of the political spectrum speaks to melodrama’s ritual capacity for generating shared meanings through such contentious performances.

As the “tragic mulatta” of the play’s title, Zoe embodies the sensationalized suffering so integral to slavery melodramas. The trope of the “tragic mulatta” was popularized by Lydia Maria Child in “The Quadroons” (1842), Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and William Wells Brown in *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) and featured a mixed-race woman who appears white and exemplifies great virtue but falls to ruin when she is reclaimed as a slave. Although she desires to adhere to the ideals of “true womanhood,” especially sexual purity, the “tragic mulatta” must always eventually realize that her slave status will prevent her from achieving freedom and respectability. The sentimentalized pathos of this figure made her extremely appealing to antislavery activists and their white audiences, meaning that Americans were familiar with this trope by the time that *The Octoroon* was performed. Boucicault utilizes this trope within a context of racial determinism, which has the effect of irrevocably linking Zoe’s bodily suffering to her interracial identity. As we will see, Zoe suffers less so because of her enslaved condition and more so because of her “mulatta” selfhood, which is presented as an inescapable ontological quality.

Zoe’s “mulatta” identity is the driving force behind much of Boucicault’s melodramatic operations. A slew of critics have called attention to the fact that Zoe’s identity formation is rooted in suffering.³⁸ Going further, Daphne A. Brooks points out that “her identity is tentative, shifting, and contested” because of the “taxonomic (in)determinacy of [her] body, [which] challenged the order of things in antebellum culture” (35). Indeed, Zoe’s identity is one of creole hybridization that makes visible the shaping force of colonial relations on the bodies brought together in New World settlements, particularly in New Orleans, one of the central markets of an Atlantic

economy fueled by the sale of human bodies and agricultural commodities. D. A. Brooks charges that Zoe's identity poses an unusual disturbance to melodrama's Manichean logic. While D. A. Brooks is right about the slipperiness of Zoe's "mulatta" identity, she tends to oversimplify the melodramatic form, which regularly features destabilizing identities and attempts (but never quite succeeds) to pin them down to static (Manichean) meanings or else erase them altogether.³⁹ To be sure, Zoe's identity is called into question by the other characters, as D. A. Brooks illustrates. She is treated as a servant and denied common courtesies by the aristocratic Sunnysides. Mrs. Peyton treats her as an adopted daughter. Unable to read her racial identity in the pigmentation of her skin, George defends her as if she were a white lady, while M'Closky covets her as sexual property. Is Zoe white or black, pure or corrupt? In order for the recognition of virtue and villainy so key to melodrama to take place, Boucicault tries to exhibit the "truth" of Zoe's identity. Staging the substitution of new national identities—which as America formed were increasingly tied to essentialist racial distinctions that provided ideological backing for a democracy in which citizenship was granted only to white men—for those of colonial hybridity depends on such a possibility. As the dominant mode of performance in the nineteenth-century, melodrama is at the forefront of orchestrating such substitutions but not without contention.

Throughout the course of the play's action, Zoe's identity—racial and moral—is staged in scenes of dramatic excess that hinge on her suffering, including her revelation of her "true" bodily appearance, her sale on the auction block, and her tragic suicide. In what has been the most discussed scene of the play, Zoe reveals to George that she is not white but an octoroon and therefore unfit to marry him even though she loves him. To do

so, she invites George, and the audience, to take a long hard look at her body parts in an “erotic spectacle” that is performed as a kind of “striptease” (D. A. Brooks 38). This scene underscores Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s assertions about the treatment of the black female body within the culture of slavery:

Being black and female is characterized by the private being made public, which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women’s sexuality and private parts. There is nothing sacred about Black women’s bodies, in other words. They are not off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable. (18)

Having George inspect her fingernails, eyes, and hair, Zoe shows him the “dark fatal mark,” the “blueish tinge,” “the ineffaceable curse of Cain” that inscribes her as an “unclean thing” (Boucicault 2.1). This depiction of Zoe is a prime example of what Henderson says about antebellum representations of the black body generally: “[They] draw attention to the central practice of pathologizing the black body and accentuate the abject status of slaves as commodified flesh” (24). In (re)producing racialized identities that bolster American nationhood, Boucicault’s melodrama uses such pathologizing to render the split between (white) citizen and (black) slave morally legible.

When George urges Zoe to marry him despite her mixed-race identity in violation of anti-miscegenation laws, she replies that she would rather “immolate [their] lives” than commit such a wrong, for her “race has at least one virtue—it knows how to suffer!” (Boucicault 2.1). George communicates that all of this—the bodily display and her willingness to suffer—only make him love her more. In true melodramatic fashion, we find that Zoe’s racial identity has had a physical manifestation all along, one with a moral dimension. As Zoe explains, her black blood renders her impure and illegitimate, thereby

enabling the narrative construction of purity as racially signified. In the words of Jennifer DeVere Brody:

Forms of hybrid, black femininity might have been ‘invented’ to differentiate between the identical production of so-called legitimate and illegitimate cultural categories. Ironically, hybrids produce ‘pure’ forms and create culturally oppositional categories. . . . By naming the mixture as ‘mixed’ and illegitimate, a fiction of prior purity and legitimacy is confirmed. (12)

Zoe traces all of her virtuous qualities, her tendency towards love and self-sacrifice, to her white blood. This is the ironic element of her suffering, for though she suffers because of her blackness (“the dark fatal mark”), it is her whiteness that enables her capacity for such emotions, just as it is her white-appearing skin (Robertson did not play Zoe in blackface) that facilitated sympathetic identification with white spectators. Furthermore, it is precisely at the moment of the “mulatta’s” self-denial that she becomes worthy of such sympathy. Here as elsewhere in the play, sympathetic identification tends towards the erasure of black selfhood.

Zoe’s sale on the auction block is arguably the most sensationalized scene in the play. Having previously lived her life as if she were a free person, Zoe finds herself claimed as saleable property when the Peytons go bankrupt and Terrebonne is put up for auction. In staging the slave auction scene, Boucicault tapped into a performative spectacle so pervasive in antebellum culture that Roach considers it “as American as baseball” (220). In New Orleans, slave auctions were popular, theatrical events staged in the rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel, replete with live music, entertainment, and theatrical costumes—formal wear for male slaves and brightly hued dresses for female slaves (Roach 211-212). Slaves were made to dance and sing and “jump Jim crow.” “Fancy

girl” auctions were especially popular, where buyers bid high prices for light-skinned sex slaves, raising the “erotic stakes in a public, democratic spectacle that rivaled all but the most private pornographic exhibitions in Europe” (Roach 215). Even abolitionists made use of slave auctions, most notably Henry Ward Beecher who staged mock slave auctions in his church where the congregation was called upon to “bid” high prices for mostly “mulatta” slaves in order to raise enough money to purchase their freedom. Northern audiences came to expect a ritualized performance of black suffering with erotic undertones in representations of slave auctions, while southerners expected theatricality and entertainment from the real thing. Boucicault integrates both dimensions of the spectacle into his play.⁴⁰

Before Zoe enters the auction scene, the other slaves of Terrebonne are auctioned off one by one. It is in this moment, above all others, that minstrel representations play a prominent role on stage. Notably, these other slave characters are not mixed-race, are played by white actors in blackface, and speak in the fabricated “black” speech of minstrelsy. Accordingly, they do not suffer. In fact, they have been directed by Ole Uncle Pete, the eldest slave on the plantation, to “Cum, for de pride of de family, let every darkey look his best for de Judge’s sake—dat ole man so good to us, and dat ole woman—so dem strangers from New Orleans shall say, dem’s happy darkies, dem’s a fine set of niggars” (Boucicault 3.1). Ole Pete plays the role of the stock plantation “darky,” or Jim Crow, hugely popular on the minstrel stage. His directions to his fellow slaves to perform their supposed satisfaction with their condition at auction is in a manner consistent with the actual mandates of slave-sellers, who made sure their slaves looked

their best and danced and sang to prove their contented, docile demeanors to potential buyers. As Hartman asserts:

[T]he constitution of blackness as an abject and degraded condition and the fascination with the other's enjoyment went hand in hand. . . . affiliations between these diverse sites of performance outline the problematics of enjoyment in which pleasure is inseparable from subjection, will indistinguishable from submission, and bodily integrity bound to violence. (33)⁴¹

Boucicault did nothing new in integrating such minstrel types into his melodrama; just look to Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Harry, Topsy, Sambo, and Quimbo "jump Jim Crow" in minstrel breakdowns for proof.

A difference between the two plays, however, is that Aiken's minstrelized black slaves suffer while Boucicault's decidedly do not. Although Ole Pete's directives seem to point at the performative nature of the slave's behavior at auction, he does, in fact, stop their tears by getting them to feel the need to show the heartfelt gratitude that they really do, in fact, feel for their owners, the Peytons. As Ole Pete says, even Grace with her many children "didn't mind how kind old Judge was to her," in a neat elision of sexual violence to which Grace heartily agrees (Boucicault 3.1). The slaves' lack of suffering is further orchestrated by the fact that the southern gentlemen who buy them make sure not to separate families out of the kindness of their hearts—a nice parlay to white southern audiences on Boucicault's part. Of course, these slaves occupy the block briefly in comparison to Zoe who steals the scene. Upon her entrance, the tone shifts dramatically from that of minstrelsy to melodrama. As Roach wryly comments, "Even from a slave sale, black people are excluded" (224). The point here is not merely to indicate the obvious racist stereotyping of the play but to illustrate the ways in which black

constructions of identity in melodrama were rooted in both sensationalized suffering and minstrel entertainment. It matters which black characters have the power to evoke sympathetic identification and which do not, for these formulations work in conjunction to establish patterns of the representations of blackness in the dominant culture.

The portrayal of Zoe on the auction block drives this home as her suffering intensifies the alternation between pathos and action that underpins this sensationalized scene and gives melodrama its primary structure. After having witnessed the quick-paced, exhilarating action of the other slaves being sold to reassuringly “happy” homes, audiences were primed for the intense pathos generated by Zoe’s display, knowing that the villain M’Closky waited in the crowd to secure her as his sexual property. Zoe occupies the block, then, as the “fancy girl” of the auction, and a bidding war ensues between M’Closky and those ostensibly trying to save her from concubinage. Ironically, George earlier refers to Zoe as a “true woman,” but as Guy-Sheftall and others before her have explained, it was impossible for enslaved black women to live up to the standards of true womanhood—the nineteenth-century ideal of civilized femininity—because they were legally prevented from occupying the place of the domestic wife and also because they were the sexual property of their masters (23). In opposition to George, McClosky relishes seeing Zoe on the auction block as a “fancy girl” because his view of her is framed by the racist stereotype of the black woman as a hypersexual creature brimming with animal passion. Such a view, as Guy Sheftall explicates, shifts responsibility for sexual violence away from the white male perpetrator and on to the black female (21-22).

This erotic spectacle was enhanced, presumably, by American audiences’ unavoidable familiarity with the stripping of slaves so common to such events. Detailing

the extensive circulation of images of nude “mulattas” at auction, Roach explains that most theatergoers would have known that Zoe would have had to strip and “she would have been stripped by association in the minds of the viewers” (220). Zoe is made into a sexual object at the precise moment that she is commodified as property. At the same time, however, audiences are invited to sympathize with Zoe who is also presented as the innocent victim suffering at the hands of the torturing villain. Here, innocence is tied to her willingness to sacrifice herself in submitting to being sold and to her sexual purity, symbolized by her white dress. Though she is rendered silent in the scene, her suffering is conveyed bodily through her “very pale,” faint aspect, a powerful means of non-verbal expression in melodrama, when the extent of suffering cannot be conveyed in words (Boucicault 3.1). As before, Zoe is constructed as more sympathetic to audiences because of her white appearance and coded-as-white behavior (her speaking in formal English and having the etiquette of a lady) in strong contrast to the other slaves at auction. This scene can be considered as a primary example of Hartman’s analysis of the dynamics of sympathy as shaped by the conditions of chattel slavery. The white spectator becomes:

. . . a proxy and the other’s pain is acknowledged to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to disappear. . . . the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. (Hartman 19)

Ironically, Boucicault’s creation of a humanized, black character defined by her innocent victimry facilitates the obfuscation of black identity, which is nothing more than a mere simulation in the imagination of white viewers. The limits of Zoe’s melodramatic

suffering are also apparent in the fact that her bid for sympathy is made at the exact moment of her objectification.

Zoe's selfhood is further obscured by the symbolic nature of the threat of rape she faces. This danger functions not so much as a threat to Zoe's person but as the dispossession of the white male inheritor at the hands of his bitter rival. The theme of dispossession looms large since the narrative is, in good part, a mortgage melodrama. Literally transformed into property on the auction block, Zoe faces the prospect of being purchased as the sex slave of M'Closky when all signs point to her "rightfully" belonging to George. The suffering spectacle of Zoe's body on the block forms the backdrop for a scene of heightened action—the physical fight between George and M'Closky (as shown in the illustration below). They fight not to protect Zoe but to possess her and thereby assert ownership of the property for which her body stands. Boucicault continues a colonial discourse of sexual violence in which women's bodies and sexualities were positioned as sites of conquest. Similar to the ways in which Native American women's bodies stood for figures of the land in the early colonial writings that have influenced nineteenth-century melodrama, Zoe's body is symbolic of the Terrebonne plantation. Similar to Native women, black female slaves were threatened and brutalized with rape, but melodramatic convention, having its roots in the colonial Atlantic world, shapes such violence into figurations of white male entitlement. Terrebonne sits on dispossessed Native American land that has become the cotton kingdom through the expropriation of slave labor. Positioning Zoe's body at the crux of such formations, Boucicault stages the "rightful" ownership of that land as belonging to white American men in an attempt to erase the memory of colonialism's disturbing legacy.



SCENE FROM MR. BOUCICAULT'S NEW DRAMA AT THE ADELPHI: THE SLAVE MARKET—SALE OF THE OCTOROON.

Figure 3. Illustration of the “sensation scene” in *The Octoroon* featuring the sale of Zoe on the auction block, as it appeared in *The Illustrated London News* (30 Nov. 1861) along with the following excerpted commentary: “That beautiful Octoroon—what feels she? They who would save her from the threatened degradation—what feel they? And in that determined wretch, who exceeds his means in her purchase—O! What a hell there is in his bosom, of premeditated guilt, and even already of an anticipated remorse!” (562).

Accordingly, the act ends in a dramatic tableau featuring M’Closky having won Zoe at auction. The tableau provides moral legibility by emphasizing his evil power over the innocent victim. Essentially, M’Closky embodies all the evil forces at work in the play, including avarice and lust, as he covets both the Terrebonne plantation and Zoe’s person. This allows for two means of assigning blame for the wrongdoings associated with slavery. First, M’Closky’s bottomless greed is to blame for the sundering of families and selling of humans on the auction block rather than the system of white male ownership that makes the material conditions of slavery possible. Second, his debased lust for Zoe stands in for the problem of miscegenation itself—a problem that must be resolved, as Zoe’s mixed-race identity has thrown the order of things into disarray. It is as

if by projecting the crimes of Zoe's father (who presumably violated his female slave, i.e. Zoe's mother) onto M'Closky, the threat of miscegenation can be expunged.

In order for this expurgation to occur, not only must M'Closky be condemned and punished but also the "mulatta" must be purged from the narrative. M'Closky's sinful covetousness and violent intentions precipitate Zoe's suicide, implying that her suicide can be blamed on him rather than the slave system, according to the play's Manichean logic. In the ultimate act of self-immolation, Zoe drinks poison, not to save herself from the villain's evil grasp, but to gratify the wishes of George, who would "rather see her dead than his [i.e. M'Closky's]" (Boucicault 5.1). In this moment, Zoe's selfhood is obliterated, which is facilitated further by the bodily purging of her blackness in death. Observing that the "blueish tinge" has left her eyes, Ole Pete exclaims, "Dat's what her soul's gwine to do. It's going up dar, whar dere's no line atween folks" (Boucicault 5.4). As Roach asserts, this amounts to expunging black identity (224). In the words of D. A. Brooks, the melodramatic excess of the play is "the heterogeneous complexity of bodies and identities in nineteenth-century transatlantic culture"—a complexity that resulted from colonial relations (41). Such excess is done away with through an act of violence that undoes the social and moral disorder occasioned by miscegenation (at least on the individual level).

Zoe is not the only heterogeneous body of excess in the play, however. There is also Paul, the "mulatto" slave "boy" belonging to the Peyton's. The play's second narrative line centers on Paul's murder and his Indian friend Wahnotee's quest for revenge. Little critical attention has been given to this storyline in comparison to Zoe's, even though it comprises an equal portion of the play's action. Matthew Reborn argues

that Paul and Wahnotee portray an “interracial union” that escapes melodrama’s conventions, including the formation of identity rooted in suffering (107). Yet Paul suffers tremendously due to his racial hybridity and this precipitates Wahnotee’s extravagant actions, so the two as a couple are, in fact, emblematic of melodrama’s character types involving suffering. Their action is also pivotal to restoring moral legibility in the drama’s melodramatic dénouement. To begin with, Paul is constructed as Zoe’s double—another “mulatto” character who challenges society’s categorizations of order. Like her, he is young, innocent, and handsome. Also like her, he “was a favorite of the Judge,” who curiously, excused him from hard physical labor, as Mrs. Peyton explains (Boucicault 1.1). Zoe and Paul are the only light-skinned slaves on the plantation and the only two who are granted a relative degree of freedom to do as they please, as well as a pass on much of the labor performed by the other slaves. Perhaps Paul is Zoe’s brother, son of the late Judge Peyton. The white neighbors bristle at his favored treatment, urging Mrs. Peyton to put him to work in the fields, while George befriends him as a hunting companion. As with Zoe, the white characters find Paul’s identity questionable; therefore, the “truth” of his identity—racial and moral—must be exhibited.

Paul calls into question the order of things, not only through his mixed-race identity, but also through his relationship to Wahnotee. As Zoe explains, “Wahnotee is a gentle, honest creature, and remains here because he loves [Paul] with the tenderness of a woman” (Boucicault 1.1). That is, Wahnotee refuses to disappear into the West with the rest of his tribe out of his deep attachment to Paul, despite the fact that the white authorities want him to leave. As Sunnyside says, “That Indian is a nuisance. Why don’t he return to his nation out west,” and Mrs. Peyton adds, “Wahnotee, will you go back to

your people?" (Boucicault 1.1). Although Wahnotee conforms, in some ways, to racist stereotypes (his appearance, his craze for rum), he is not the "vanishing Indian" of American myth. He is, however, a romanticized "noble savage." He and Paul traverse the wilderness, hunting, talking (Paul is the only one who understands the Indian's mash-up of French, Spanish, and English), and spending the nights together. As Roach notes, they are reminiscent of the white male/racialized other pair, fleeing the wilderness in their escape of civilization's restrictions, which Leslie Fielder identifies as archetypal to the American adventure narrative (199). In this vein, the two bend societal norms regarding gender and sexuality. While Zoe compares Wahnotee to a woman, a female actress always played Paul on stage, so the performance of both characters involves gender-bending. Their intense affection has homoerotic overtones. Unlike Zoe, Paul speaks in the manner of a minstrelized plantation "darker," a trait that perhaps renders his close relationship to Wahnotee, the Indian, more palatable to white (male) audiences who were likely familiar with the homoeroticism displayed in the cross-racial identifications of minstrelsy.⁴² The romantic nature of their relationship is further reinforced by the fact that Wahnotee is, in many ways, George's double. Both George and Wahnotee feel a deep love for a character of "mulatto" identity, and then both suffer the loss of their beloved. In addition, the partnership of Paul and Wahnotee, like that of Zoe and George, serves a melodramatic function. As a romanticized child of the wilderness uncorrupted by civilization—with a woman's heart to boot—Wahnotee is primed to bear witness to Paul's innocence, which he recognizes long before the white characters do.

Through Wahnotee, the audience develops sympathy for Paul, who chafes under his enslaved condition and disregards the domineering orders of the white characters who

treat him as a chattel. At one point, Paul even goes so far as to disobediently challenge M'Closky by threatening him with Wahnotee's skills as a warrior. M'Closky is upset because Paul "guns in [his] swamp" and shoots his livestock, disregarding M'Closky's property rights as owner (Boucicault 1.1). Paul gets away with this behavior because he has the protection of Wahnotee, although he comes dangerously close to receiving a severe whipping from M'Closky, a sign of Paul's victimized status.⁴³ In his villainy, M'Closky has obtained ownership of the land in what amounts to legalized theft of what rightfully belongs to the Peytons (and if Paul is Judge Peyton's son as the narrative seems to imply, the slave's motivations become even more complicated here). Recognizing, in a moral sense, that Paul is the innocent one and M'Closky the villain, Wahnotee stands at the young man's side. Similarly, Wahnotee waits at the bedside of Paul when the latter suffers from swamp fever. Considering that melodramatic conventions posit affliction as the ultimate sign of innocence, this is a clear indication of Paul's moral standing. In more ways than one, Paul's suffering informs his identity. Yet, such displays of cross-racial sympathy challenge the order of the white southern plantation owners, who find it impossible to secure Paul's obedience or Wahnotee's departure for the West.

If Paul's identity as a suffering innocent is initially unclear to the play's white characters, it is undeniable when he becomes the victim of M'Closky's atrocious violence. In an assertion of his own subjectivity, Paul insists on having his picture taken just like the aristocratic Sunnysides. Denied such a privilege by the white characters, he presumes to sit for his picture anyways when he thinks he is alone with Wahnotee. Precisely at the moment when he asserts his own selfhood, Paul is murdered. M'Closky brutally kills him with a tomahawk, as the token of Paul's beloved Indian becomes the

instrument of his own death. M'Closky's motivation is to steal the check that Paul unknowingly carries in his mailbag, which would enable the Peytons to keep their property, including Zoe, and so he targets both "mulatto" slaves in one fell swoop. Rushing onto the scene as M'Closky flees, Wahnotee discovers Paul's dead body and one of the play's most melodramatized action sequences ensues. In an extended pantomime, likely set to emotionally-charged music, Wahnotee tries to rouse Paul, finds he is dead, smashes the camera in confused anguish, and expressing "grief, sorrow, and fondness," lifts Paul in his arms—at which point, the scene freezes into tableau to end the act (Boucicault 2.1). The purpose of melodramatic tableaux is to assign moral legibility through heightened gestures conveying emotions too powerful to express in words. Here, at the moment of his death, Paul becomes the epitome of the suffering victim, and Wahnotee bears witness to his virtue through his embodiment of anguish and grief. Once again, audience sympathy for a black character ironically occurs at the point of their obliteration. Still, there is something radical about this scene. Instead of being invited to sympathize with a black character through a white audience surrogate (such as George), spectators are urged to feel cross-racial sympathy by identifying with a racialized Indian, albeit through the redface performance of Boucicault. Still, this speaks to the far-reaching implications of Paul and Wahnotee's interracial union.

Wahnotee is the only witness to Paul's murder, but he cannot verbally communicate what he has seen, and so virtue continues to be misrecognized by the other characters even as Wahnotee's pantomimed actions reveal the cosmic force of moral truth to the audience. Many plantation owners think that Paul has run away in what they see as an act of ungrateful disobedience. When the body is discovered, a lynch mob led by

M'Closky accuses Wahnotee of the murder. At this point, the play's honest, do-right Yankee, Salem Scudder, steps in as an instinctual believer in Wahnotee's goodness to demand a fair trial. Being on the "selvage of civilization," as Scudder describes it, there is no court of law, so the citizens haphazardly create their own jury (Boucicault 4.1). All signs point to Wahnotee's guilt, especially the tomahawk wound in Paul's skull. Gary A. Richardson and Stephanie J. Pocock have read this scene as part of Boucicault's critique of the legal system. While the play does bring to light several shortcomings of the law, this scene primarily functions in melodramatic fashion as the ritualized revelation of guilt and innocence. Boucicault uses the trial process, which is inherently theatrical, to provide a semblance of moral legibility, as is often the case in melodramas where the audience is invited to participate in restoring order by determining culpability.⁴⁴ In this case, the audience is privy to information unavailable to the white mob, having witnessed M'Closky's murder of Paul. Such dramatic irony would likely have intensified audience reactions to the unjust accusation of Wahnotee, heightening their sense of participation in the assignation of guilt and innocence. This melodramatic ritual is staged through a haphazard trial scene that nearly erupts into violence at several points, which is connected to the fact that it takes place within an imagined liminal space, namely on the borderlands of the new nation. This underscores the ways in which melodrama's paradoxical resolutions provide a framework for contested interpretations of moral legibility rather than offering simple answers with unquestioned certainty, even as they reflect the American desire to read morality in the visual "fact" of race itself.

The audience, along with Scudder, is at least partially vindicated in their belief of the Indian's goodness when Ole Pete finds that the camera did snap a picture of Paul after

all, at the very moment of his murder. Facilitating “melodramatic reversals in the drama’s action and in the characters’ fortunes” (Sonstegard 384), the camera is Boucicault’s chosen device for staging the recognition of virtue so integral to melodrama’s dispensation of moral meaning. Fittingly, Scudder deems the camera “The eye of the Eternal,” furnishing the “proof [of] heaven,” made visible by the “blessed sun” (Boucicault 4.1). Boucicault ingeniously uses technological advancement to lend a touch of realism to his play, even while transforming that technology into an instrument of moral truth-finding, which would prove to be a future staple of melodramatic performance. As Erdman asserts, “*The Octoroon* is embedded in a discourse which betrays a confidence in the objectivity and truthfulness of the image, as well as a sanguine faith that the image, when deployed before a jury, will be both instrument and agent of justice, racial or otherwise” (334). Visual significations always supersede the linguistic in melodrama, but Erdman’s observation points to the problem that the image-as-evidence poses in a trial embedded within dominant race relations. The onus of responsible decision-making is lifted from the persons involved and projected onto an inanimate object, which makes it easy to blame the individual perpetrator without examining the social conditions underpinning the crime. This is especially true when that perpetrator is scapegoated as the most evil of villains, as M’Closky is. Further proving his wickedness, the sinister felon escapes the clutches of the mob and blows up the steamboat (a scene that featured actual explosions on set) stationed at a nearby dock in order to provide cover for his getaway. Thus, the battle of good v. evil is staged against a backdrop of sensationalized action, expertly designed on Boucicault’s part to heighten the audience’s emotional reaction while heaping further blame onto the villainized scapegoat.

To eliminate any further threats to the socio-political order, M'Closky must be punished, if not extinguished. Wahnotee, previously the "gentle," "loving" Indian of romanticized myth turns into that other simulation of the Indian ingrained into the American psyche, the wanton, bloodthirsty "savage" of Puritan legend. Dehumanized as an animalistic predator, compared to an "alligator" and a "bear" (Boucicault 4.1 and 5.1), he ruthlessly pursues M'Closky in his flight through the Louisiana swamps. These shifts in the symbolism deployed through Wahnotee's character have led Roach to comment on the polysemy of the Indian in American culture generally and in this play particularly. He suggests that the Indian's dual representation can be read as:

an eerily doubled projection, the duality of American justice—the retributive violence of the law of the frontier, which is to say vigilantism, and the grandly sweeping constitutional appeal, over the heads of all previously existing civilizations, to the Enlightenment's 'Laws of Nature.' (Roach 188)

These two simulations of the Indian are well suited to melodrama's purposes.

Accordingly, the gentle Wahnotee leads audiences to recognize the virtuous innocence necessary to the restoration of stability, while also acting as the violent avenger, willing to engage in savage brutality to expunge the evil forces that have disturbed the cosmic order.

An underlying irony is that Wahnotee's actions assist the dispossessed Peytons in maintaining hold of their property—property that was the original home of his people. In this way, the play comes dangerously close to making visible the colonial relation between the genocidal de-territorialization of Native American peoples and the expropriation of African slave labor into southern plantocracies that continues to shape American nationhood. This relation is occluded, however, by positioning Wahnotee as

George's double. Thus, the indigenous Native American, with his rightful entitlement to repatriation, is mutated into a sign for the white disenfranchisement obsessed over in mortgage melodramas.⁴⁵ This makes Wahnotee even more suitable as the pursuivant of M'Closky. The final tableau of the play portrays the Indian standing over the slain M'Closky in front of Paul's grave, a tableau that is immediately preceded by one of Zoe dead in George's arms, underscoring the connection between the two storylines. Wahnotee has revenged not only Paul but Zoe as well and so he has eliminated the violence and abuse suffered by the play's sympathetic, mixed-race characters. His defeat of M'Closky is staged as the triumph of virtue.

As usual, melodrama's resolutions are not without serious contradictions. Although Paul's and Zoe's suffering is felt to have been avenged, attesting to their worthiness of audience sympathy, they are also themselves eradicated, and along with them goes any trace of miscegenation. As is clear in both storylines (Zoe's warranting George's desire to marry her and Paul asserting his subjective selfhood), these "mulatto" characters have disturbed the dominant power relations of slavery. A sense of the superabundant, indeterminate bodies "so characteristic of Anglo-American responses to the teeming human and material panoply of the circum-atlantic" world necessitates a violent "performance of waste" (Roach 185). Accordingly, the violence that destroys Paul and Zoe, even as it renders them sympathetic, expunges the challenges that miscegenation poses to the dominant order of American nationhood and melodrama's categorical distinctions alike. This expurgation works in tandem with the destruction of the villainized scapegoat, M'Closky, the symbol of white greed, lust, and abuse of power. It is significant that M'Closky is a northerner and therefore can be seen as an interloper

drawn to the South to take advantage of honorable, trusting plantation families. With his death, the suffering of slavery is supposedly eliminated and the Peytons win back their land.

In “resolving” the conflicts of slavery, Boucicault relies on the existing social structure of white, male entitlement to property, a structure that enabled the conditions of Native American dispossession and African slavery in the first place. Nonetheless, the play does draw attention to the destabilized identities that, to an extent, call slavery’s power relations into question. What’s more, it highlights the possibilities of cross-racial sympathy and alternative sexualities that have radical, disruptive potential, particularly when they lead to an alliance between indigenous peoples and New World Africans. It is possible that audiences may have latched onto such possibilities despite the conclusions drawn by the denouement. In fact, Boucicault’s strategies are quite similar to Medina’s in *Nick of the Woods* (as was his stagecraft), begging a question of influence between the two. Both plays feature paradoxical moral resolutions that purge the destabilizing identities that they put on display. Yet, just as *Nick’s* Telie proliferated in the American imagination through a series of resurrections, so *The Octoroon’s* Zoe and Paul may have broken the bounds of the play’s faux solutions to racial conflict, particularly as the melodrama thrived as a “work of the public mind.” Actually, audiences in London were so incensed by the death of Zoe that Boucicault wrote an alternative ending in which she lives and is happily reunited with George, a poignant illustration of how contested melodrama’s search for moral legibility always is.

CHAPTER FIVE

A COMIC APPROACH: BLACK AGENCY AND WHITE AUTHORITY IN WILLIAM WELLS BROWN'S *THE ESCAPE*

A melodrama that goes much further in destabilizing racial identities than *The Octoroon* is William Wells Brown's *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858). An ex-slave who had escaped to freedom, a famous abolitionist lecturer, a self-made man who worked variously as a writer, barber, doctor, and performer, W. W. Brown was, perhaps most importantly, an early pioneer of African American letters. Throughout his literary career he trail blazed as the first African American to author a novel (*Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*), the first playwright to have been born in slavery, the first African American to write a drama about American slavery, and the first African American to publish a play (Peterson 40-41).⁴⁶ He was well acquainted with drama, having attended many plays during his travels in Europe (Botelho 187). Brown's first play *Experience; or, How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* (1856), a satirical response to Nehemiah Adam's *A Southside View of Slavery; or, Three Months at the South* (1854), was never published and is not extant. His second play, *The Escape*, was never staged, per se, but Brown gave dramatic readings of it on the antislavery lecture circuit as early as February of 1857 and published it in 1858 (Peterson 42).

By the time Brown gave his first dramatic reading, he was already a well-known antislavery lecturer and a powerful performer. Undoubtedly, he had a serious talent for theatricality and turning from lecturer to dramatist offered new possibilities that went beyond the conventions of antislavery oratory. To perform as a black abolitionist and an ex-slave, Brown had to work within the dominant white culture's perceptions of race. As Harry J. Elam explains, "The ex-slave oratory itself functioned as a racialized performance in which the former slave performed his blackness" (290). With his drama, Brown was able to push the limits of accepted racial representations through literary figurations, shift through various performance identities, and work across multiple generic forms. His artistic innovations were well received amongst abolitionist audiences. As one reviewer writes, "Mr. Brown's Drama is, in itself, a masterly refutation of all apologies for slavery, and abounds in wit, satire, philosophy, arguments and facts, all ingeniously woven into one of the most interesting dramatic compositions of modern times" (*Auburn Daily Advertiser* qtd. in *The Escape* 48). In giving dramatic readings of *The Escape*, Brown embodied the personas of a host of diverse characters—black and white, comic and serious. Playing different roles was perhaps not new for Brown, as emphasized by Paul Gilmore, "The professional fugitive was, in essence, required to embody the social meanings of blackness and whiteness simultaneously, to be both the illiterate plantation slave of the minstrel stage and an eloquent defender of his race" (38). Certainly, though, drama allowed him a new means of artistic control. bell hooks offers a high estimation of the African American performance artist:

[They] have always played a role in the process of collective black political self-recovery, in both the process of decolonization and the

imagining and construction of liberatory identities. It has been a space where communities of resistance are forged to sustain us. (220)

In just these ways, Brown can be viewed as an early African American performance artist who introduced inventive strategies of resistance to the American stage.⁴⁷

In writing and performing a melodrama that challenges dominant racial configurations, Brown draws from a variety of sources. He reworks material from his previous publications, such as *Clotel*. He relies upon the stock character types and moral significations of melodrama. He also incorporates minstrelsy into his play as well as abolitionist performance rituals, such as antislavery songs. In fact, some of the songs come from Brown's own *The Anti-Slavery Harp: A Collection of Songs for Anti-Slavery Meetings* (1848), a work that tapped into the popular use of music as a moral organ, explains Aaron D. McClendon (88). Two songs that are used in *The Escape* are actually rewritten minstrel tunes, re-appropriated by Brown for the purpose of political resistance. In using minstrelsy in his melodrama, he expands the ambiguities submerged in the entertainment's racialized forms. As D. A. Brooks explains:

[T]he heterogenous body of the blackface figure performs 'blackness' while simultaneously (en)acting and producing 'whiteness.' . . . The blackface minstrel performer defamiliarizes both racial categories, calling them strangely into conversation and proximity with one another. (29)

Brown goes further and turns blackface into a means of exploding radical identities. Infusing melodrama with a comic imagination of ribald raucousness, he dismantles white authority and turns the suffering of the slave body into a motivating force for the exertion of black agency. Situating the play within the melodramatic tradition for the first time, my reading elucidates the extent to which Brown deploys Manichean types and paradoxical resolutions in order to probe the moral (il)legibility of chattel slavery. Many

scholars have commented on the trickster identity of the play's main character, Cato, a figuration that lies at the core of the play. I add to this conversation an examination of the ways in which Brown also humanizes and empowers the play's black female characters, even to the point of having his heroine, Melinda, engage in violent self-defense, a radical move for an ex-slave in antebellum America.

The plot of *The Escape* focuses on the Kentucky plantation owned by Dr. Gaines, a medical practitioner and slave master. One storyline features Glen and Melinda, the mixed-race hero and heroine of melodrama proper, whose suffering innocence marks them as the play's source of virtue. Dr. Gaines covets Melinda, who has secretly married Glen, and tries to make her his sex slave. The second storyline centers on a minstrelized slave named Cato who wears the mask of the obedient slave while in actuality questioning the status quo. Cato's trickery and buffoonery satirize his master's behaviors. A range of white characters also make appearances, including slave owners, slave traders, religious leaders, military officers, northern abolitionists, and righteous Quakers. Through these characterizations, Brown underscores the performative nature of whiteness as a dependent counterpart to blackness, wearing both masks himself as the sole performer in his dramatic readings.

In opposition to *The Octoroon*, then, Brown's play embraces the instability of the racial categories that result from colonial relations. Race is not necessarily tied to bodily markers in *The Escape* as it is with Zoe's "dark fatal mark." Brown's play opens with a stage direction that describes one character as "SAMPEY, a white slave," immediately emphasizing the tenuousness of racial demarcations. Later in the play, Major Moore misrecognizes Sampey as Dr. Gaines's legitimate son (Sampey is actually Dr. Gaines's

illegitimate son by one of his slaves and therefore a slave himself). Even southern plantocrats cannot read the bodily signs of race upon which their system of chattel slavery, and American citizenship, depends.⁴⁸ Instead of relying upon an essentialist view of race, Brown stresses that race is socially determined, as several critics have argued. Ernest, Gilmore, Elam, and Bryan Sinche all explicate the different ways in which Brown shows race, particularly blackness and whiteness, to be a social performance that depends on the recognition of others.⁴⁹ This does not mean that identities in *The Escape* are entirely precarious, however, as they are still grounded in the moral significations of melodrama's Manichean logic. In comparison to *The Octoroon*, though, its racialized identities have far less direct correspondence to moral assignments.

Of particular importance to the play's identity formations are the ways in which whiteness is rooted in social performances of authority that depend on configurations of blackness. The first scene touches upon the perceived authority of Dr. Gaines who explains to his wife that yellow fever has been raging in New Orleans:

Men of my profession have been reaping a harvest in that section this year. I would that we could have a touch of the yellow fever here, for I think I could invent a medicine that would cure it. But the yellow fever is a luxury that we medical men in this climate can't expect to enjoy. (Brown 1.1)

Despite the doctor's corrupted view of his profession, Mr. Campell enters the scene and hires him as his family physician, attesting to the doctor's authority. Although he is accepted as a skilled doctor by his community, we see here that Gaines cares little for improving his patients' health, a point that is reinforced when it is revealed that he administers bread and potato pills (i.e. placebos) as treatment. His authority is nothing more than a convincing performance, while his ill intentions are an early indication of his

villainy. Dr. Gaines's social position also depends on his slaves performing docile obedience. As Stephen P. Knadler asserts:

Whiteness is not only a 'cultural fiction' but also a performance that is always in the process of (but never quite successful at) imitating and approximating itself. . . . The hegemony of white supremacy . . . depended—and still does depend—on its repetition within the 'marrow' of individual identities, on its being successfully imitated and internalized. (428-429)

Brown shows that Dr. Gaines's power over his slaves is enhanced when Cato, who is perceived as a "faithful" slave by his master, tattles on those who disobey, such as Sam and Hannah (1.4). Cato, however, disobeys his master himself when he can do so without being caught. Thus it is made clear that the master's white authority is contingent upon the slave's black submissiveness and that both are crafted performances.

Reverend Pinchen and Mrs. Gaines demonstrate another type of white identity rooted in authority through their performance of religion. Rev. Pinchen, like Dr. Gaines, performs his authority through a display of dissemblance. He tells the story of a powerful sermon he gives on horse stealing after having his own horse stolen (Brown 1.4). In the sermon, he threatens that he already knows the thief's identity and will reveal it to the public if he does not get his horse back (he does *not* actually know who the thief is). Adding further questionability to the Reverend's religious authority is his willingness to buy and sell slaves after lecturing the slave trader, Mr. Walker, on the moral pitfalls of such a business (Brown 2.2). Rev. Pinchen often visits Mrs. Gaines, ostensibly to discuss religious experience but really because the two have illicit affections for one another. During their discussions, Mrs. Gaines professes her faith while threatening her slaves:

And what power there is in the gospel! . . . Oh, it is so sweet to sit here and listen to such good news from God's people! You Hannah, what are

you standing there listening for, and neglecting your work? Never mind, my lady, I'll whip you well when I'm done here . . . you lazy huzzy!
(Brown 1.4)

Brown indicates that Mrs. Gaines's reputation for piety does nothing to prevent her from inflicting barbarous cruelties on her slaves. Indeed, Mrs. Gaines's hypocrisy knows no bounds as she often plays at being the melodramatic suffering heroine when in reality she is a villainous tyrant. Speaking of her former marriages, Mrs. Gaines manufactures tears to position herself as the pitiable widow (Brown 1.4) and later weeps melodramatically while charging her husband with unfaithfulness in front of his friends (Brown 2.1). Even though they are part of Brown's humorous satire here, counterfeit tears are a serious matter in melodrama, which privileges such bodily displays as the ultimate sign of afflicted innocence. Mrs. Gaines's gross hypocrisy identifies her as a villain, an unusual position for a female character as melodrama tends to feminize virtue. Her performed behaviors, therefore, point to the fragility of social categories regarding both race and gender.

The moral authority that defines white abolitionist identity is also laid bare as social performance. Mr. White, a Massachusetts resident with antislavery sentiments, is confronted with hostility by slaveholders at the American Hotel in Kentucky. In response, Mr. White asks for a private room in a move that points towards the attempts many northerners made to separate themselves morally from what they saw as the corruption of the South, while denying the North's involvement in slavery. There are no private rooms available, however, which may be Brown's way of saying that northern complicity in slavery is undeniable. Hay suggests that Brown introduced the theme of white liberal hypocrisy to African American theater and probably to the American stage in general

(87). Confident in his self-righteousness, Mr. White tries to defend his beliefs with a grand speech that rests on transcendentalist tenets:

Conceive of a mind, a living soul, with the germs of faculties which infinity cannot exhaust, as it first beams upon you in its glad morning of existence, quivering with life and joy, exulting in the sense of its developing energies . . . in the auroral light of its unconscious immortality. . . . follow it in its dark and dreary passage through slavery, until oppression stifles and kills. (5.1)

The speech is taken, almost verbatim, from renowned Boston literary critic and lecturer Edwin Percy Whipple's "Intellectual Health and Disease" (1850). This essay is not about chattel slavery but about those life experiences that drain the soul of its spiritual power, and so Brown's use of it acts as a commentary on the soul-crushing effects of race slavery. At the same time, it acts as a commentary on a northern intellectual elite whose white privilege enabled them to condemn slavery without having to do anything about it. Mr. White flees the South undercover when the southerners at the hotel form a lynch mob against him. By the end of the play, however, he chooses to fight for the protection of fugitive slaves although he remains a morally ambiguous character (just before joining this fight Mr. White treats two poor pedlars with callous contempt). Through Mr. White, Brown shows that the moral authority granted white abolitionist performers in the North does not necessarily correspond to actions taken on behalf of the slave.⁵⁰ The point is driven home through Mr. White's foil, Jones—a northerner always willing to defend the slave even in physical altercations, and the Neals—a Quaker family who often help fugitive slaves escape to Canada. These other white characters attest to their virtue, in melodramatic fashion, by singing an emotional antislavery song about the Underground Railroad.

As slavery melodramas almost always do, *The Escape* features minstrel performances but Brown turns minstrelsy to different purposes in using it to highlight the tenuousness of white identity. In deploying minstrelsy as a means of resistance to white hegemony, Brown was making use of the ambivalent representations of race already inherent to the form. As Gilmore explains, minstrelsy's "images foregrounded the slippage between performative and essential notions of blackness," and Brown reveals how those notions "were dependent on and constantly in play" with those of whiteness (39). Cato is a character that embodies the exaggerated buffoonery of the blackface performer in its "dandy Jim" incarnation as a slave who strives to rise above his station.

At the same time, Cato can be seen as a trickster, a figure rooted in African American folk traditions, who works within the system that oppresses him to overturn its hierarchical configurations. Cato's use of minstrel language "signifies" on his master's white authority and, in so doing, undermines it.⁵¹ Putting on Dr. Gaines's medical coat, Cato says, "I allers knowed I was a doctor, an' now de ole boss has put me at it, I muss change my coat. Ef any niggers comes in, I wants to look suspectable. . . . Ah! now I looks like a doctor. Now I can bleed, pull teef, or cut off a leg" (Brown 1.2). Cato's language and actions indicate that Dr. Gaines's medical authority rests in something as mutable as a costume change while his use of "suspectable" instead of respectable (using the wrong words while trying to mimic white behavior was a common element of blackface comedy) points to his master's true nature. As Ernest says of the scene, "Dr. Gaines serves as Cato's mirror. Through this looking glass of minstrel performance, Brown presents a vision of the mutually contingent cultural scripts of that which stands for white and that which stands for black" ("Reconstruction of Whiteness" 1114). In

addition, the language slippage functions as catachresis, a rhetorical device often conveying heightened emotions in melodrama, to illustrate Dr. Gaines's unworthy moral status, for Dr. Gaines is nothing if not "suspectable." Cato also mirrors Dr. Gaines's faked authority by mixing up the ingredients for ointments and pills and then asserting that his master won't know the difference anyways (both are placebo treatments). Additionally, he reverses the typical order of medical practice by prescribing remedies for a patient (Mr. Campbell's field slave) before looking at his tongue and feeling his pulse, which points again to the faked performance that Dr. Gaines himself directs Cato to mimic.

In a subsequent segment of the scene, Cato pulls the wrong tooth of another slave, Bill, and then they brawl. As others have noted, the action is similar to a popular minstrel sketch, "The Quack Doctor" (ca. 1850).⁵² Following the fight, Cato "rushes about the room frantic" having discovered his doctor's coat is torn:

Dat nigger has tore my coat. . . . Cuss dat nigger! Ef I could lay my hands on him, I'd tare him all to pieces. . . . By golly, I wants to fight somebody. Ef ole massa should come in now, I'd fight him. . . . Oh, my coat! I rudder he had broke my head den to tore my coat. (Brown 1.2)

When Dr. Gaines enters the room to ask what all the noise is about, however, Cato obsequiously says he is just doing as he has been told. Cato's duplicity underscores the performative nature of the slave's supposed obedience.⁵³ The reality is that slavery's brutality pits Cato and Bill against one another. At the same time, Cato's language indicates that performance (the doctor's costume) is more integral to one's social identity than bodily markers (one's head). In borrowing Dr. Gaines's costume, Cato takes on a sort of disguise, and it is the villain, according to melodramatic convention, who wears

disguises. In this way, Cato “signifies” on his master’s villainy, acting as a mirror for his false authority and corrupt hypocrisy.

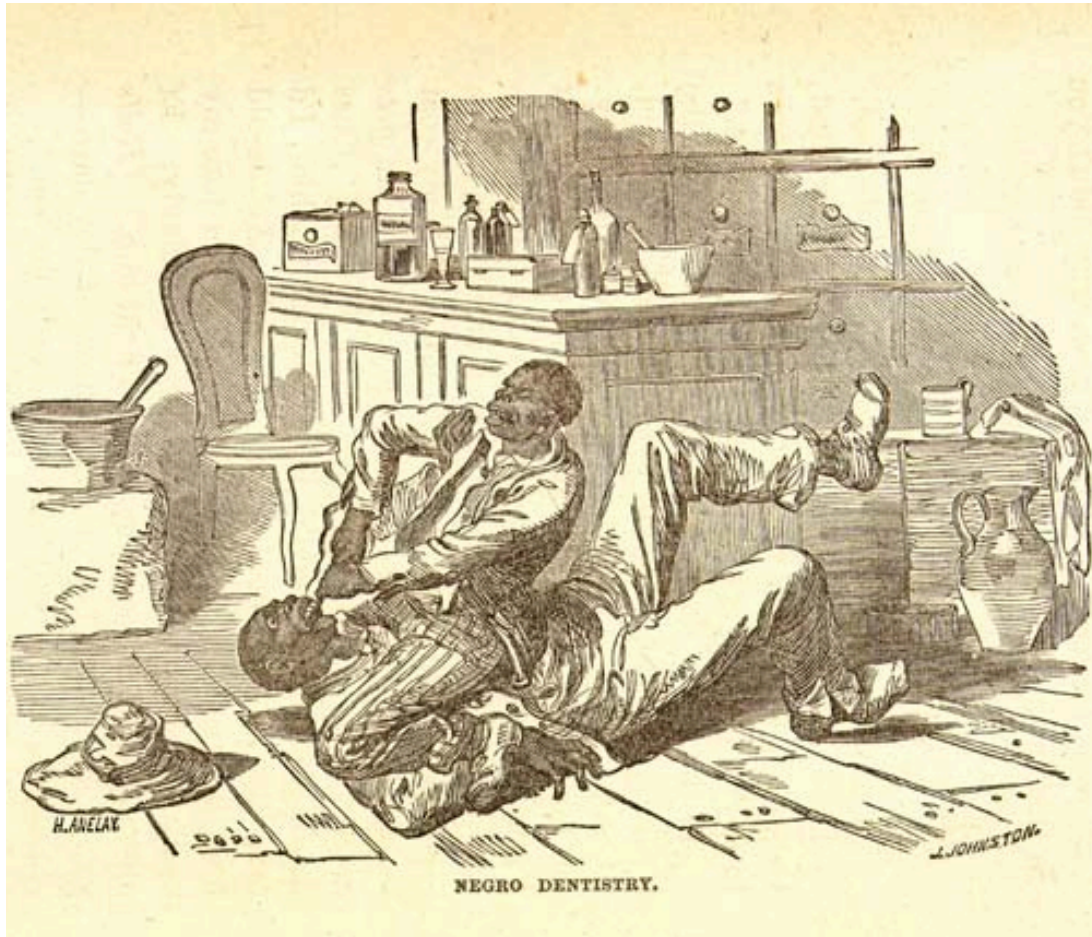


Figure 4. Brown first used the scene of the tooth-pulling in *Clotel* and later in *My Southern Home*. This illustration of “Negro Dentistry” accompanies the scene in both texts. As Sinche writes, “While *Southern* is not a drama, the picture works with the dramatic dialogue to remind readers that they have been watching a minstrel show featuring a self-important slave, exaggerated physical representations, a credulous and befuddled slave master, and uproarious physical comedy” (85).

Cato’s minstrel performance takes on another dimension, that of the abolitionist performer, when he sings “A Song for Freedom” (1848). The song was written by Brown and published in his *Anti-Slavery Harp* and is a re-working of the ridiculously popular minstrel tune, “Dandy Jim from Caroline” (ca. 1843), from which Brown borrows the musical air. Having Cato sing the song is another instance of “signifying,” for Cato is a

“dandy darky” who, like the Jim from the minstrel song, dresses above his station, looks at himself often in the mirror, and ostentatiously courts women. Once more, Brown makes clever use of the elements already present in the original minstrel. As Lindsay V. Reckson says:

In its attention to dress and display, ‘Dandy Jim’ envelops performative acts within the performance itself, winking (however paternalistically) at the layers of artifice embedded in blackface [and] depicts racial identity as a veritable hall of mirrors, literally refracting white desire back onto itself via the black(ened) body. (60-61)

Cato does this exactly, only more obviously so than Dandy Jim. The chorus of “Dandy Jim” goes “For my ole massa tole me so, / I’m de best looking nigga in de county oh / I look in the glass an’ I found it so, / Just as massa tell me, oh,” while that of “A Song for Freedom” is “My old massa tells me, Oh, / This is a land of freedom, Oh; / Let’s look about and see if it’s so, / Just as massa tells me, Oh” (W. W. Brown 3.2). While the first song reifies master’s authority, the second shows it to be based on lies. “A Song for Freedom’s” subsequent verses provide a multi-pronged analysis of slavery’s power relations that “signify” on American exceptionalism, self-serving religious practices, the forced illiteracy of the enslaved population, and the dismantling of black families. In a serious even-if-ironic tone, Cato powerfully expresses his suffering through song, often emphasizing the slave body as it is “whipped,” “trampled,” “choked,” “thrashed,” and “silenced” (Brown 3.2). In evoking the sensationalized suffering of melodrama, Cato positions himself as the innocent victim providing moral legibility to his condition of enslavement. Interestingly, Cato does not sing this song in minstrel dialect but in Standard English. In doing so, he trades his blackface routine for that of the free black abolitionist, revealing both as masked performances and highlighting the overlap between

the two. The move is self-reflective, for Brown gives the same embodied performances in reading and singing his drama before live audiences.⁵⁴

Just prior to performing another minstrel song, Cato gives what has come to be the most discussed speech of the play with its rumination on identity formation. Wearing his master's clothes yet again, Cato has just given Dr. Gaines the slip and run away to freedom:

I wonder ef dis is me? By golly, I is free as a frog. But maybe I is mistaken; maybe dis ain't me. Cato, is dis you? Yes, seer. Well, now it is me, an' I em a free man. But, stop! I muss change my name, kase ole massa foller me. . . . Now what shall I call myself? I'm now in a suspectable part of de country, an' I muss have a suspectable name. Ah! I'll call myself Alexander Washington Napoleon Pompey Caesar. (Brown 5.3)

Many critics comment on the relevancy of Cato's speech to racial slippage and formulations of African American selfhood, but D. A. Brooks's remarks are the most incisive. She uses this scene as a primary example of "afro-alienation," the name she gives to performance strategies of black resistance that enable the African American subject to speak from the condition of alterity (5). As an "insurrectionist act," Cato's soliloquy:

transmogrifies his own self-fragmentation into signifying parody. . . . Stringing together an inventive combination of ironies, malapropisms, and neologisms, he turns existential crisis into spiritual jubilation, self-estrangement into ecstatic self realization, and haphazard disguise into philosophical enlightenment. (D. A. Brooks 2)

The result is a defamiliarization of the black slave body as a way of positing alternative racial configurations. The act of renaming is one of great importance to ex-slaves, as was the case for Brown who details the story of his naming, un-naming, and re-naming in his slave narrative.⁵⁵ Gates identifies naming as a part of the "signifying" tradition that

combines pastiche with parody, which is certainly the case with Cato aligning Washington, America's republican hero, with military dictators and mocking the common practice of white masters giving names like Pompey and Caesar to their slaves. Examining the act of naming in African American literature, Debra Walker King asserts that "names contain an incantatory presence . . . that define (if not also guide the destiny of) the named. . . . to name is to perform magic, to call forth an entity or influence a way of being in the world" (3-7).⁵⁶ Her thoughts are poignant here, for Cato's speech transitions him from one whose existential condition is shaped by the ownership of his body to one who shapes his own identity. If his self-naming is incantatory, we can expect Cato to rise in triumph, which he eventually does. Appropriately for melodrama, Cato follows his re-naming ritual with the performance of another appropriated minstrel song. Brown also published "The Slave's Song" (1848) in his *Anti-Slavery Harp*, this time borrowing the air from "Dearest Mae," a minstrel tune about a happy, grateful slave. Cato changes the lyrics, even from the *Harp* version, to reflect his own story as a slave whose body and labor previously belonged to his master but who has since staked a claim for freedom. In addition to "signifying" on the contented slaves of plantation minstrels and melodramas, Cato's song is an emotional expression of his newly formed identity.

While Cato as the trickster disrupts identity formations, the moral valences of other black characters provide less room for open-ended indeterminacy, which is not to say that they are not social performances but just that they are more consistent performances. Taken together with Cato, these other characters provide a range of diversified black identities. Melinda and Glen play the roles of the hero and heroine of romantic melodrama with its hyperbolic language and exaggerated emotions. Dr. Gaines

threatens their matrimonial union despite the fact that it is legitimated by the order of cosmic truth, a “holy wedlock . . . sanctioned . . . in heaven” (Brown 3.1). Thus, the classic melodramatic role of the aristocratic villain is projected on to the slaveholder. Initially set up as a “tragic mulatta” figure, Melinda with “the moistened cheeks” is always “in tears again” (Brown 3.1), so that her victimized suffering, inscribed on her body, establishes her innocence. As Elam observes, Melinda and Glen speak in an elevated, poetic manner that differs from the other black *and* white characters and challenges racial stereotypes regarding black intelligence and literary ability (292-293).⁵⁷ Melinda’s soliloquys match the rhetorical style of those that Peter Brooks finds so characteristic of melodrama, a “pure self-expression . . . through moral and emotional integers” made in the “tone of exaltation” (38). So Melinda introduces herself to the audience:

It is often said that the darkest hour of the night precedes the dawn. It is ever thus with the vicissitudes of human suffering. After the soul has reached the lowest depths of despair, and can no deeper plunge amid its rolling, foetid shades, then the reactionary forces of man’s nature begin to operate, resolution takes the place of despondency, energy succeeds instead of apathy, and an upward tendency is felt and exhibited. Men then hope against power, and smile in defiance of despair. (Brown 3.1)

In addition to positioning herself as the suffering innocent, Melinda’s speech points to the potential power of her tears, foreshadowing a transition from passive suffering to active agency. As Williams argues of tears generally in melodrama, Melinda’s grant her a moral superiority (as does her elevated language) that eventually gives sanction to over-the-top action.⁵⁸

As there is a slave sale in the play, one might expect Brown to put Melinda on the auction block as the suffering “tragic mulatta.” Such scenes were a favorite American

spectacle staged at slave markets and abolitionist performances alike (as explained above in relation to the scene of Zoe's sale in *The Octoroon*). Instead, Brown positions two black (not mixed-race) field slaves on exhibition, Sam and Sally. Having been hired out by his master as an assistant to a slave trader, Brown had a great deal of personal experience on such matters.⁵⁹ The scene he stages in *The Escape* acts as a powerful response to the sensationalized suffering of the "mulatta" at auction so popular with antislavery audiences. Mr. Walker, the slave trader, examines Sam's mouth and teeth "same as [he] does a hoss" (Brown 2.2), thereby demonstrating the degrading commodification of the slave's body. Expecting to be entertained by this body, Mr. Walker bids Sam to dance. Sam refuses and asserts his agency by saying, "I don't like to dance; I is got religion" (Brown 2.2), but Mr. Walker reads this as another sort of obsequious performance that he can turn to profit remarking, "Oh, ho! you've got religion, have you? That's so much the better. I likes to deal in the gospel" (Brown 2.2). Big Sally, "worth her weight in gold for rough usage" (Brown 2.1), is valued for her labor and treated as livestock in a way that denies her gendered identity. Guy-Sheftall asserts that the perceived "exceptional unfemininity" of black female slaves, particularly those who performed hard labor, was dehumanizing as "true womanhood" was considered a marker of humanity (32). Brown makes the same commentary through Sally. Both Sam and Sally shed tears when they are sold, a recognition of their suffering that is more typically reserved for light-skinned characters. Notably, this is not the heightened suffering seen with Boucicault's Zoe, it is not lingered on as a spectacle, and it does not invite sympathetic identification. In what can be read as a corrective to

mainstream (including abolitionist) depictions of slave sales, this is a simple assertion of Sam's and Sally's humanity as obvious fact.⁶⁰

Brown extends his focus on black female slaves to three other characters, Hannah, Dolly, and Susan. Regarding his novel *Clotel*, Giulia M. Fabi comments on Brown's lack of black female characters—in opposition to “mulatta” characters designed to appeal to white readers and also in comparison to black male characters (639). While none of the black female characters in *The Escape* rival the dynamism of Cato or Melinda, it does seem that Brown puts more effort into lending visibility to black female identity in this play compared to some of his other works, which is important to note given the tendency for such characters to be eclipsed in much abolitionist writing of the time. Hannah is Sam's wife and after his sale Mrs. Gaines makes her marry Cato against her will. In a key scene, Hannah tries to refuse Cato, and Mrs. Gaines whips her until she submits to the ordeal. Significantly, the whipping takes place off stage. For all of the play's references to whippings, none take place on stage; instead, attention is drawn to such afflictions through ellipses in stark contrast to the passive suffering put on visible display in most slavery melodramas. This positions the sadistic beating of the slave body as submerged trauma, that which is poignantly felt and gestured towards but which is never expressed directly. It thus functions as the repository of the moral occult in this melodrama, a sign of evil's spectacular power that cannot be adequately conveyed. This aspect of the play recalls W. W. Brown's oft-quoted Salem lecture in which he comments on the impossibility of ever truly representing the horrors of slavery.⁶¹

Cato's complicity in Hannah's beating contributes to its awfulness, for he refuses, even at the other slaves' pleadings, to interfere or say that he does not want Hannah for

his wife because, as he says, he *does* want to marry Hannah and also he does *not* want to get whipped himself (Brown 3.2). This is one of several methods that Brown uses to comment on the patriarchal aspect of slavery's power relations. Cato and Hannah parallel Dr. Gaines and Melinda as both men pursue the objects of their desire, or lust, through the violent means of others (Cato through Mrs. Gaines and Dr. Gaines through his overseer). Dolly and Susan, Hannah's allies, are the voices of moral truth in this scene, providing testimony to the displays of guilt and innocence they witness. Dolly chastises Cato, "you great big wall-eyed, empty-headed, knock-kneed fool. You're as mean as your devilish mistress," while Susan comments on Mrs. Gaines's shortcomings, "can't speck any ting else from ole missis. She come . . . from 'mong de poor white trash. . . . You can't speck nothin' more dan a jump from a frog" (Brown 3.2). Their words provide humor but, more importantly, they provide judgment and so Dolly and Susan have the critical role of assigning moral legibility to the situation.

Brown performs the slave body engaged in violent rebellion far more than he does its passive suffering. The first instance of rebellion is filtered through the ambivalences of minstrel performance. Cato brags of his skills as a doctor to Tapioca unaware that Dr. Gaines hides in the corner spying on them: "I is de head doctor 'bout dis house. . . . I beats de ole boss all to pieces" (Brown 2.3). When Cato mistakes his master's angry whispers for that of thieves, he attacks, knocking down Dr. Gaines with a chair. Brown uses the exaggerated brawling and bodily violence of blackface entertainment to stage a scene of thinly disguised rebellion. While the black body is usually the target of minstrelsy's blows and mutilations, here Dr. Gaines's white body is and his pain is reduced to ridicule. The scene ends with Dr. Gaines chasing Cato round a table. So

blackface and whiteface become reflective masks as the master is made to participate in the raucous buffoonery of minstrelsy as a white man.

Somewhat stereotypically, it is the mixed-race characters that perform serious rebellions and stage the climactic scenes of melodrama where moral allegiance is played out in acts of villainy and heroism through physical combat.⁶² Having struck Dr. Gaines, Glen sits in prison awaiting the ghastly punishment of five hundred lashes from the overseer, Mr. Scragg. He gives vent to the rebellious fervor of slave insurrection:

I struck the doctor. . . . He takes my wife from me, sends her off, and then comes and beats me over the head with his cane. I did right to strike him back again. I would I had killed him. Oh! there is a volcano pent up in the hearts of the slaves of these Southern states that will burst ere long. When that day comes, woe to those whom its un pitying fury may devour!
(Brown 4.1)

Glen's rhetoric recalls those rare melodramas featuring violent slave insurrections, such as William Barrymore's *The Foulahs! or, A Slave's Revenge* (1823) and the African-American playwright William Alexander Brown's *King Shotaway* as well as his adaptation of *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack*.⁶³ These precursors all feature slave insurrections in the West Indies, however, whereas W. W. Brown gestures towards insurrection on American soil. In another use of melodramatic rhetoric, Mr. Scragg identifies himself as the villain through self-nomination: "I had rather whip that nigger than go to heaven, any day,—that I had!" (Brown 4.1). In an act of daring heroism, Glen bloodies Scragg's face and cracks his skull before jumping out of the window to escape, eventually to freedom.

In an incredibly rare scene for which Brown's play deserves special attention, the melodramatic heroine stages her own violent insurrection. Having placed Melinda in a

secluded cottage so as to make her his concubine, Dr. Gaines comes to see her. At first claiming that he will make her a “lady,” Dr. Gaines reveals his true position when Melinda refuses his offers: “I’ll let you know that you are my property, and I’ll do as I please with you. I’ll teach you that there is no limit to my power” (Brown 3.5). His comments lay bare the power relations of slavery in which the black female body is subjected to a sexual violence legitimized by the institution’s legal and social arrangements. Melinda responds with a powerful curse:

[A] woman’s bitterest curse will be laid upon your head, with all the crushing, withering weight that my soul can impart to it; a curse that shall haunt you like a spectre . . . a curse, too, that shall embody itself in the ghastly form of the woman whose chastity you will have outraged. (Brown 3.5)

Transfiguring her own body into the emblem of this curse, Melinda takes control of her identity in an assertion of self-agency that challenges her master’s attempts to make of her body a passive object. In addition, her curse acts as a revelation of Dr. Gaines’s evil treachery, while her tone of exaltation points to the realm of cosmic truths whose ethical meanings are the driving force behind melodrama’s excess. Melinda wins this battle, and Dr. Gaines retreats.

As the scene continues to unfold, suffering increasingly gives way to self-motivated acts. In melodrama, tears function as *the* device that “gives moral authority to action” (Williams 32). Accordingly, the ever-weepy Melinda transitions from the pathos of suffering to the exhilaration of action, thereby driving melodrama’s structural operations. Unbeknownst to Dr. Gaines, his wife has followed his tracks and enters the cottage with designs of murdering Melinda in a jealous rage. “You trollop! . . . I tell you to drink this poison at once. Drink it, or I will thrust this knife into your heart! The poison

or the dagger, this instant!” (Brown 3.5). Defending herself with a broom, Melinda “sweeps off Mrs. Gaines,” knocking her to the floor, and sending her cap, combs, and curls flying (Brown 3.5). While the scene provides a form of ribald entertainment somewhat similar to the fight between Cato and Dr. Gaines, this does not detract from its radical subtext. Brown reveals the gendered dynamics of slavery here, which subjects both black and white women to patriarchal rule, by indicting the white lady as an active participant in the violent brutality centered on the black body.⁶⁴ This is also the central scene of sensationalized violence in the play, a reversal of fortune that is melodrama’s acting out of virtue’s liberation from evil. That a black *woman* (even one of mixed-race identity) enacts such a heroic and violent rebellion is, as far as I know, unparalleled in slavery melodramas and extremely rare in the whole of antebellum American literature.

The play concludes on the banks of the Niagara River where a re-united Melinda, Glen, and Cato await a ferry for final passage to freedom in Canada. Dr. Gaines, Mr. Scragg, and a host of northern officers enter to seize the fugitives (the officers’ assistance provides critical commentary on the Fugitive Slave Law). A fight ensues in which Glen and Cato engage once more in violent rebellion, assisted by Mr. White, who appears to have learned that resistance to slavery requires real action. In a bold melodramatic tableau, the play closes with Dr. Gaines and his crew knocked on the ground, as the fugitives literally rise above the villains in boarding the ferry, waving and cheering for freedom. Moral significations are on display for all the public to see. Such a resolution does not comment much on socio-political remedies for slavery, although the plot implicitly calls for immediate abolition, which an antislavery audience would understand without being told. In accordance with melodrama’s conventions, conflicts are resolved

on an individual level for these three main characters while the sensationalized action of the scene may distract from the larger issues that the melodrama earlier highlights.

This denouement reinforces the strand of individualism pervading the entire play, where self-reliance is the only viable means of resisting slavery's dehumanizing effects. This may be a result of Brown's personal experience; he was a self-made man after all. It is also a tactic that would appeal to a liberal New England audience.⁶⁵ While the play relies on the value placed on individualism by the dominant culture, one can hardly say that it is conservative, as melodrama is often generalized to be. Cato's "signifying" performances as a trickster undermine the racial categorizations that make chattel slavery possible, while nearly all of the black characters maneuver to claim their bodies and their identities as their own. In a particularly unconventional move, Brown lends visibility to diverse representations of black female identity and justifies the exertion of black female agency, even through physical rebellion. Similar to William Apess in his *Eulogy on King Philip*, Brown infuses melodrama with satirical parody and mocking antics. Both oratorical performers use mirroring to turn dominant racial configurations on their head while still operating within a melodramatic framework of racialized victimization and vilification. Accordingly, *The Escape's* racial identities pose a destabilizing disruption to essentialist discourses on race that complicate its paradoxical moral resolutions, while its boisterous physical altercations galvanize in the spirit of melodramatic ritual. The responses of Apess and Brown to the melodramatic tradition help to paint a more complete picture of the form's contentious nature as a raucous entertainment.

CHAPTER SIX

A RATIONALIST APPROACH: WHITE ABOLITIONIST IDENTITY AND BLACK STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE IN LYDIA MARIA CHILD'S *THE STARS AND STRIPES*

A play that seems to have been directly influenced by *The Escape* is Lydia Maria Child's *The Stars and Stripes: A Melo-drama* (1858). Child likely wrote her play late in the year 1857, while William Wells Brown had performed his in early February of the same year. It is quite possible that Child saw him perform *The Escape* on the antislavery lecture circuit; if not, she presumably would have read about it in the press. Despite the striking similarities between these two authors' plays, critics have not discussed the connections between them, nor has it been posited that Child intentionally bases her character, Jim, on Brown's Cato, as I argue below. It is especially interesting that Child borrows from Brown in *The Stars and Stripes* given that he took, almost verbatim, her short story "The Quadroons" and incorporated it into his novel *Clotel*. Critics have long noted Brown's reliance on Child's works, but my research indicates, that the literary "borrowing" between these two authors went both ways. While Brown's melodrama is raucously satirical at every turn, however, Child's is somewhat more serious in tone.

Relying upon melodramatic conventions, Child translates the idealism and earnestness of New England abolitionist culture into the material of a popular genre. She was in a unique position to speak to such a culture as one of the leading antislavery reformers of her day. Her foundational *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833) won many politicians, activists, and thinkers to the cause and exerted a great influence on the movement. She was also the editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (1841-1843) and wrote a plethora of fictional and non-fictional antislavery works throughout her lifetime. While much of her abolitionist writing has received a great deal of critical attention, *The Stars and Stripes* has received hardly any at all, despite its inclusion in a recent anthology of slavery dramas (Gardner 437-478). Including this play within critical discussions of Child's body of work helps to illustrate the shift in her antislavery approach nearing the Civil War, testifies to her complex engagements with African-American strategies of performative resistance, and also demonstrates her thoughtful involvement with popular American forms (particularly those of US theater culture). Similar to Brown's play, the plot of *The Stars and Stripes* centers on two storylines, one featuring a romanticized mixed-race couple who ingeniously escape to freedom and the other featuring a trickster slave whose entertaining minstrel performances critique the power relations of chattel slavery. While appealing to her intellectual abolitionist culture through ironic juxtapositions, Child also rouses the emotions with displays of the suffering slave body set against the backdrop of patriotic symbols and ritual celebrations. She alternates this strategy with another borrowed from black antislavery activists, the re-appropriation of minstrelsy. In doing so, Child turns an ironic lens on melodrama itself since minstrelsy was integral to American melodramatic

performance. With such strategies, Child mobilizes the arsenal of her specific culture in conjunction with black performance strategies of resistance in order to transform white identity so that it can act through cross-racial solidarity in a more energetic and even violent way on the eve of civil war.

The Stars and Stripes seems to be Child's only foray into drama, which is somewhat surprising given her significant relationship to the theater as well as her prolific contributions to almost every other category of American literature. For her popular newspaper column, *Letters from New-York*, Child often wrote about American performance culture, describing shows at concert halls and theaters such as the Philharmonic, the Vauxhall, the Park, and the Bowery. In addition to attending the theater, she regularly supported musicians and actors by promoting their work as a critic and helping them to secure patronage.⁶⁶ Her personal letters reveal that she was an admirer of melodramatic opera and a witness to the Astor Place Riot, the violent class conflict sparked by the rivalry between the favorite American actor Edwin Forrest and the British Shakespearean William Charles Macready.⁶⁷ Although Child was wary of the excessively nationalistic and violent brand of melodramatic theater emblemized by the Bowery and its so-called "b'hoys," she recognized its cultural importance, saying, "The Bowery lays itself out to gain the hearts of the million, by gorgeous decorations, fantastic tricks, terrific ascensions, and performances full of fire, blood, and thunder" (*Letters from New-York: Second Series* 174). She was far more admiring of melodramas whose moral import she approved, such as Jonathan Trowbridge's *Neighbor Jackwood* (1857), of which she enthusiastically writes, "It represents slave-catchers outwitted by Vermont

farmers, and the fugitives getting off safely through many perils. *That's* a sign of the times, isn't it?" (Child *Selected Letters* 309).

In this vein, Child wrote *The Stars and Stripes* and published it as a closet drama in *The Liberty Bell*, a gift book sold primarily to women and families for the benefit of the annual antislavery fair in Boston. The most substantial and longest lived of abolitionist gift books, *The Liberty Bell* contained contributions from many of the leading literary figures of the day (Sanchez-Eppler 24). The antislavery fair, organized by the Boston Female Antislavery Society, was a successful commercial event that sold gifts for the holiday season, offered a variety of entertainments, and drew large crowds (Chambers-Schiller 268). The fair and the gift book were cornerstones of abolitionist culture and ritual. Child's contribution is unique, however, as drama rarely appeared in the pages of *The Liberty Bell* despite the widespread use of performance in antislavery culture. Although the gift book could have been given to proslavery individuals in hopes of changing their minds, it was more often exchanged within circles sympathetic to the antislavery cause. This context explains the play's many references to abolitionist culture and indicates that the play was likely aimed towards a New England antislavery audience. Accordingly, Child's play does more to incite abolitionists to action than merely to convince readers of slavery's wrongs, an aim matching her other late-1850s literary endeavors and reflecting her growing sense that civil war might be necessary.

As the 1850s drew to a close, Child's ambivalence regarding violent measures for the abolition of slavery grew. Carolyn L. Karcher demonstrates that although Child always abhorred war and assigned nonviolent sacrifice the highest reverence, she

increasingly feared that war might be the only means of ending slavery. In a personal letter from 1857, Child confesses:

[Pacifism] has been my normal state of mind for twenty five years. But the capture of Burns, the outrages in Kansas, and the attack upon Charles Sumner, roused from the depths of my nature feelings, of whose existence I was not aware. The Puritan metal within me was struck, and rung a loud tocsin through my soul. For the first time in my life, I understood Charlotte Corday. (*Selected Letters* 312)

Additionally, Child's passionate defense of John Brown, raider of Harper's Ferry, published as *Correspondence between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia* (1860), demonstrates a sharp shift in tone from the "conciliatory rhetoric" of her earlier tracts to one that is "accusatory and openly sectional" (Karcher 424). Though Child calls for disunion, not outright war, the *Correspondence* fueled northern animosities and roused antislavery advocates and their sympathizers.

A piece that shares much in common with *The Stars and Stripes* and that Child penned the same year is "The Kansas Emigrants" (1857), a short story published in the *New York Tribune* in response to the "Bleeding Kansas" conflict. As Karcher explains, the piece targets Republicans and Garrisonian abolitionists, urging them to unite in active support of the Republican party in the upcoming elections as well as the free-state settlers engaged in armed battle. Rethinking her commitment to nonviolence, "Child asked [Garrisonians] to weigh their peace principles against their antislavery goals and choose between them" (Karcher 391). Similar to *The Stars and Stripes*, "The Kansas Emigrants" pivots on a melodramatic polarization between victimized innocence and evil treachery, incorporates rousing songs and iconoclastic imagery, and urges a jeremiadical return to America's founding principles. As these similarities show, spotlighting *The Stars and*

Stripes can provide a foundation for examining the significant influence of melodrama on Child's fiction, an influence that has yet to be fully acknowledged and discussed by critics of her work.

In addition to the vivid picture of New England abolitionist culture it provides, what makes *The Stars and Stripes* unique is its relationship to African American performative strategies of resistance. Somewhat similar to Charlotte Barnes in *The Forest Princess*, Child seems to be intent on incorporating the voices and experiences of the races she represents. While Barnes mainly gleans the biased historical record for such voices, Child draws from the many interactions she had with numerous African-American individuals who had recently experienced slavery. As Karcher and Eric Gardner have both observed, the primary storyline of *The Stars and Stripes* is loosely based on the actual historical persons William and Ellen Craft, whom Child knew quite well (Karcher 413, Gardner 440). I contend that Child also borrows directly from W. W. Brown's *The Escape* by including a revised version of one of his original songs in her play and basing her character, Jim, on his Cato. It is also possible that she had Henry "Box" Brown's performances in mind when creating Jim's character, a suggestion that Alex Black has also made.⁶⁸ All four sources (the Crafts, W. W. Brown, and "Box" Brown) had been fugitive slaves, published slave narratives, and performed on the antislavery lecture circuit. The Crafts famously escaped from bondage in disguise, with Ellen dressed as a southern gentlemen and William pretending to be "his" slave.⁶⁹ Significantly, W. W. Brown (already a well-established antislavery lecturer at the time) invited the Crafts to tour with him and, eventually, Henry "Box" Brown joined their performances, too. Their alliance "became one of the most renowned and influential

abolitionist combinations in both America and Britain” (Blackett 58). “Box” Brown made his escape from slavery by shipping himself in a box from Virginia to Philadelphia, a feat that he would re-perform on stage to disbelieving crowds. He also created a moving panorama, “Mirror of Slavery” (1850), that was a sensation. As W. W. Brown did, “Box” Brown rewrote and performed minstrel melodies “from a radical black abolitionist perspective” (D. A. Brooks 118).⁷⁰ Child incorporates a dizzying combination of these black performance strategies into her play, a radical yet not unproblematic tactic for a white author. Blending these strategies with a powerful display of white abolitionist identity, Child seeks to bolster the antislavery movement’s sense of community through ritual performance and to spark cross-racial solidarity through the theatrical figurations of melodrama, all in the hopes of moving her gift-book audience to action.

The first scene of the play, set on the Fourth of July, features the sensationalized beating of a slave named William. A plantation picnic is being thrown to celebrate the holiday, framed by a large evergreen arch with the word “LIBERTY” woven in flowers across it (Child 1.1). William carries the American flag, topped with a liberty cap, in a procession with several other slaves. When the cap falls to the ground, William playfully puts it on his head. In consequence, he receives a brutal beating from his overseer while a group of white plantation owners gather around the flag and sing patriotic songs. William does not speak, but Child’s stage directions indicate that he conveys his suffering bodily through “heaving breast” and “flashing eyes” (1.1). The scene functions as a satirical parody of the common Independence Day pageantries by contrasting slavery’s brutality with the emblems and rituals of American liberty. Ironically, Child uses one kind of performance to critique another—she uses the melodramatic display of suffering to

condemn the hypocrisy that she finds inherent to American displays of freedom and equality.

As Melissa Lingle-Martin has observed, this imagery is strikingly similar to that compiled by Child in the 1843 *Antislavery Almanac*, which contains an image of a slave tied to the American flag in readiness to be whipped (see below). In addition, this exact image was circulated once more when it appeared as the frontispiece to W. W. Brown's *The Anti-Slavery Harp*. Both the *Almanac* and the *Harp* juxtapose the image of the slave tied to the American flag with an untitled poem (1838) written by Thomas Campbell that reads:

United States, your banner wears,
Two emblems,—one of fame;
Alas, the other that it bears
Reminds us of your shame!
The white man's liberty in types
Stands blazoned by your stars;
But what's the meaning of your stripes?
They mean your Negro-scars. (374)

The use of this imagery and its association with Campbell's poem was common and was part of a broader deployment amongst Garrisonian abolitionists of an ironic historiography that appropriated the patriarchal traditions of the early American republic for disenfranchised people of color by positioning America's past legacy as the potential source of their future redemption.⁷¹

Child uses the imagery of the Fourth of July celebration as a means of condemning slavery as early as 1833 in her *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*.⁷² The meaningful link between slavery's brutality and American democracy was important to Child. In the *Appeal* Child asserts:

Slavery is so inconsistent with free institutions, and the spirit of liberty is so contagious under such institutions, that the system must either be given up, or sustained by laws outrageously severe; hence we find that our slave laws and customs have each year been growing more harsh than those of any other nation. (70)

As Lingle-Martin asserts, Child's abolitionist approach often centers on "iconoclastic juxtaposition," a way of using "American icons to indict American hypocrisy," as is the case in her melodrama (213). In juxtaposing two highly conventionalized spectacles, that of the patriotic pageant and the suffering slave body, Child invites viewers to reflect on the contradictory relationship between them and recognize the failure of republican freedom.

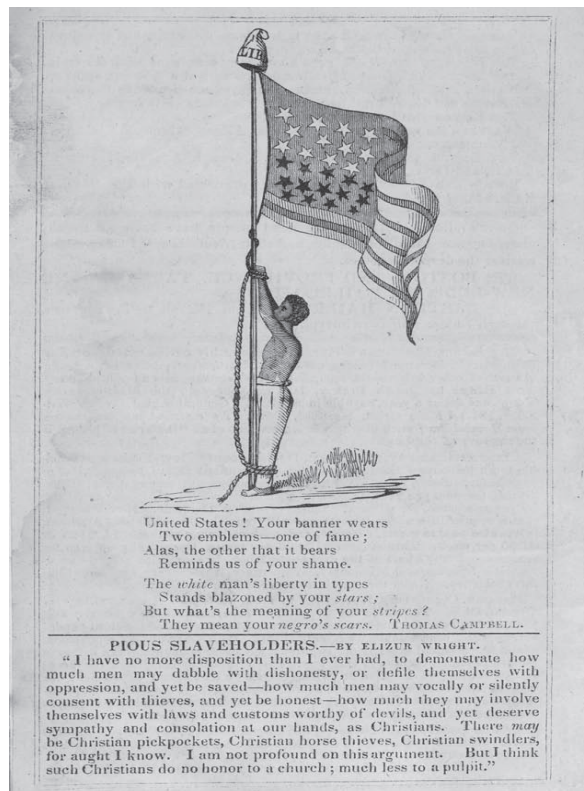


Figure 5. Back cover of the 1843 *Antislavery Almanac* compiled by Child.

In a performative context, this strategy of juxtaposition takes on a heightened aspect of embodied significance, namely that of transformative ritual. To perform the

scene is to re-enact bodily two spectacles that had reached the point of over-saturation within New England abolitionist culture. Feeling that America's founding principles have been forsaken and need to be restored, Child stages the substitution of one icon for another—slave for flag—thereby transforming the suffering slave into an embodiment of the nation. The slave body bears the weight, not only of individual agony, but also of America's travail under the conditions of slavery. What begins as an attempt by the overseer to use his "whip as pen" and "the flesh of the slave as his text" (44) as a means of showing his mastery and silencing William's embodied action, Child transforms into a sign of personal pain that becomes an "acknowledgment of communal pain" (38).⁷³ The slave comes to stand for an American body politic (both black and white) held hostage by the South. This elucidates a clear path of action: to restore the nation, redeem the slave.

This pattern of suffering and substitution can be read as both a rhetorical appeal (as with Lingle-Martin) and as the organized, conventionalized, embodied behaviors of abolitionist ritual.⁷⁴ As occurs in ritual performance, "behavior is exaggerated and simplified; movements are frozen into postures; movements and calls become rhythmic and repetitive" (Schechner 65). This is what we see in the melodramatic display of bodily suffering against the backdrop of traditional pageantry—a repetition of familiar, codified, exaggerated movements and postures. In fact, the scene comes very close to taking the form of the melodramatic tableau: as William freezes into the exaggerated posture of the beaten slave, moral significations are conveyed in what can be reduced to one icon (as it is in the *Almanac*). As is the case with ritual, this performance has an efficacious quality beyond the function of entertainment, to build *communitas* and to effect change.⁷⁵ In staging two conventionalized spectacles through a process of ritualized substitution (or

“surrogation”),⁷⁶ Child fosters a sense of community amongst her intended audience of abolitionists, appealing to their iconoclastic ways and so rallying them to united action, as the prospect of civil war looms large.

The whip-scarring of William’s body is his “passage through the blood-stained gate,” a primal scene of “terrible spectacle [that] dramatizes the origin of the subject” (Hartman 3). As Hartman demonstrates, such a scene is commonplace, even necessary, in antislavery texts as a means of establishing the humanity of the slave for white audiences.⁷⁷ Shortly after the beating, William’s owner, Mr. Masters, in a scheme to convince his visitor Mr. North of the happiness of his slaves, claims that he “couldn’t whip ‘em away . . . if [he] *tried*” (Child 1.1). Upon being asked if he wants freedom, William replies, “No, indeed, massa. I’d rather be a stray dog, than a free nigger” (Child 1.1). His response, like the beating scene, is laced with irony, for a stray dog is a “runaway” as is a slave attempting to escape his condition. Due to the ironic tone and the juxtaposition with the beating, this exchange illustrates that the supposed happiness of slaves is nothing more than an act performed as a strategy of survival, and so a space opens for the audience to see William’s subjective agency. At a time when slaves were routinely made to perform their supposed “comfort with bondage and natural disposition for servitude” (Hartman 37), Child’s use of self-reflexivity regarding performative behavior is important in that it reveals the power relations of chattel slavery. Unlike Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*, which presents slaves performing their happiness at auction as sincere, Child’s play seeks to expose “the brutal calculations of the [slave] trade” and “underscore the affiliations of spectacle and sufferance” (Hartman 37). What Hartman seeks to show about actual historical performances of slaves’ supposed contentedness is

precisely what Child attempts to show in this scene: William's "simulation of consent" is "an orchestration intent upon making the captive body speak the master's truth as well as disproving the suffering of the slave" (Hartman 38). By placing William's faked acquiescence in juxtaposition with the pageantry and whipping, Child underscores its performative nature, thereby drawing attention to the fact that his willful display is designed to conceal his true feelings, which are cued visually through his "heaving breast" and "flashing eye" (1.1). These bodily registers are positioned as a sort of revelation to the play's audience of abolitionists, appealing to their sense of moral superiority, and so they are able to recognize William's humanity and subjective agency.

As is always the case in melodrama, the "real truth," so-to-speak, is revealed when surface realities give way to the moral occult.⁷⁸ William's half-concealed intimations of bodily suffering (unseen by the slaveholding characters yet recognized by the abolitionist audience) point to an excessive agony that can only be felt not conveyed in words. He is the embodiment of innocence reduced to powerlessness, the sign of evil's treachery. In using the whip-scarring of William's body to establish his subjectivity, Child runs the risk of creating a spectacle that appeals to a voyeuristic fascination with terror and that perhaps obfuscates the other when white abolitionists are called to imagine themselves in William's place, and even further, to identify his sufferings with their own situation as citizens beholden to the political power of the South. On the other hand, this is far from the total objectification and immolation of the black subject seen in other mainstream 1850s melodramas from Conway's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Boucicault's *The Octoroon*. Child attempts to show the common ground shared between black and white

identities to get abolitionists to recognize their collective agency so that they are empowered and moved to action.

In addition to sensationalized suffering, Child makes great use of another ritualistic form that is also inherent to melodrama, music. Her tactics are strikingly similar to those of Brown in *The Escape*; as mentioned above, she incorporates one of his original songs into her play. Almost all of the songs in *The Stars and Stripes* were quite popular and would have been familiar to her audience. In true melodramatic fashion, these songs structure the play's action and convey strong moral feeling. As a leading reformer, it is unsurprising that Child would be drawn to music as one means of moral persuasion, but her belief in the power of music ran much deeper than this. A huge fan of the art form, Child vividly describes her awakening to music while living in New York City: “[It] overcame me like a miracle . . . my spiritual relations were somehow changed by it. . . . I drew my breath with difficulty” (*Letters from New-York: Second Series*, 23). Her inclinations towards romanticism and Swedenborgian mysticism led her to embrace music as the ultimate expression of the affections: “Music is . . . the *heart* of the universe. . . . What tone is to the word, what expression is to the form, what affection is to thought . . . what moral influence is to power . . . is music to the universe” (*Letters from New-York: Second Series* 25-26). Her thoughts on music are in accordance with those of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the originator of the term *melo-drame* and an early pioneer of the form. He theorized that the sounds comprising melodies are the “signs of our affections,” having originated as an essential form of communication between humans desiring to express their “moral needs” and thereby produce a “moral effect” on the hearer (Rousseau qtd. in Scott 298-299). Essentially, Child felt that music was perhaps more

effective than language at evoking the deep emotions that she believed held transformative power over the souls of listeners.

To return to the opening scene of the play, Child's use of patriotic song contributes both to the codified ritual of the pageantry and also to her iconoclastic strand of abolitionism, turning her own culture's liking for spiritually uplifting music into satire. As the scene opens, the reveling slaveholders sing "Adams and Liberty" and "Hail Columbia!". Both songs emphasize republican freedom: the chorus of the first begins with the line "And ne'er shall the sons of Columbia be slaves" and the lyrics of the second include "Hail, Columbia, happy land! / Hail, ye heroes. . . / Who fought and bled in freedom's cause . . . / Rallying round our liberty."⁷⁹ The beating of William unfolds against the backdrop of these songs and so they contribute to Child's strategy of ironic juxtaposition. As part of the tradition of American ritual, the songs function melodramatically by evoking nostalgic feelings of patriotism and pride, which only serves to underscore the sense of hypocrisy generated by the bodily display of slavery's brutality. Presented this way, the popular musical form of melodrama becomes the vehicle for radical content.

To heighten the effect, Child also has the slaveholders sing "The Fillibusters' Song," which she presumably wrote herself: "What nation can with us compare, / In brav'ry, skill, or worth? . . . / John Bull! you'd better not set bounds / Unto our bold career! A whipping they will surely get, / that dare to interfere" (1.1).⁸⁰ "Fillibusters" refers to a group of men who, without the consent of the American government, tried to take power in several Latin American and Caribbean countries despite international neutrality laws. Child takes aim at the songs written in the South to glorify their supposed

adventures. The filibusters continue to sing about their triumphs in Mexico and their intentions to seize Cuba and Haiti, even “the planet Mars,” claiming “that Fate marks us to be / The masters of the world!” (Child 1.1). Seething with irony, the lyrics critique the widespread use of American exceptionalism as a justification for imperialism. What’s more, they point towards the real threat that William’s reach for the liberty cap poses, an interference with the white supremacist ideology underpinning colonialism, Manifest Destiny, and slavery alike. In their raucous boasting, the slaveholders make clear their motivation for extending U.S. territory through violent conflict under the premise of white superiority (as had happened recently with the annexation of Texas in 1845), namely to supplant indigenous peoples with slave plantations for capitalist profit. So Child’s satirical critique makes visible the colonial relations that have shaped the circum-Atlantic world, including the American nation, by throwing the connections between the expropriation of African slave labor and the violent wars against indigenous peoples throughout the Americas into sharp relief. The song echoes those written in the South and also captures the tenor of the melodramas popular at the Bowery, and so Child levels an incisive blow at the ways in which American culture continues to bear the disturbing marks of its colonial legacy. In satirizing the excessive nationalism and violence of popular Southern songs in tandem with that of New York theater culture, Child appeals to the intellectual rationalism of her New England antislavery culture.⁸¹ As the “vulgar-looking” songsters flaunt their unbounded avarice and hypocrisy, the audience is made to anticipate the ritualized revelation of virtue and villainy that they most likely would have come to expect from melodramatic performance and song. Such a strategy capitalizes on

melodrama's ability to inject the audience with a sensation of exhilarated anticipation, helping to mobilize them for action.

Along the same lines, Child also incorporates the minstrel tradition into her play, though she manipulates it into a strategy of resistance in ways unusual for a white author. Jim, who is perhaps the most interesting character in the play, provides critical commentary on the minstrelized "darky" types that were a staple of slavery melodramas like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon*. The name of Child's character does, in fact, recall the "Jumping Jim Crow" and "Dandy Jim" characters popular on the minstrel stage. Yet, instead of providing comic relief, Jim uses minstrelsy as a means of defiance. Child presents Jim as a trickster figure, a crafty slave whose shrewdness enables him to outsmart his domineering master. As mentioned previously, this figure originates in African American folk traditions, and Child seems to have been influenced by the performative strategies of black abolitionists W. W. Brown and Henry "Box" Brown in her creation of Jim. As with W. W. Brown's Cato, Jim's storyline is the counterpart to that of the stereotypical mixed-race hero and heroine of race melodrama. Also like Cato, Jim is a minstrelized plantation slave who parodies white characters in his "signifying" larks, appears the fool, yet escapes slavery due to his cunning. Both characters use rewritten minstrel songs as a form of resistance, much the same as W. W. Brown and "Box" Brown did on stage and in print.

Child devotes more stage directions to describing Jim's gestures and appearance than any other character in the play. A "merry-looking lad," who "nudges his companions," "gyrates his finger on his nose" (Child 1.2), "jumps about," "capers about," and whose imitative capacities include "puff[ing] like a steam engine" (Child 1.4), Jim

embodies the stereotypical minstrel character. His blackness is exaggerated as a bodily marker of his identity. “He’s so black,” explains a white abolitionist, “that it won’t do for him to show his face,” as he would surely be recognized as a runaway (Child 1.6). Jim “*can’t* be stained any blacker,” remarks another who darkens William’s lighter skin for the purposes of disguise (Child 1.6). In a play that often emphasizes the slipperiness of racial identities, the emphasis on Jim’s undeniable blackness attracts attention. Perhaps Child envisioned her character as being played by a white actor in blackface as would have been typical given that black actors were barred from performing with white actors on stage at the time. Perhaps also these are instances of xenophobia revealing a fixation on the bodily difference of the other. Certainly, the focus on Jim’s black skin distinguishes him from the play’s “mulatto” characters. In fact, Jim also speaks and acts differently than his mixed-race counterpart William, as the latter uses Standard English and exhibits the decorum of white bourgeois respectability. This may be Child’s way of setting expectations in order to dismantle them. The play’s white and mixed-race characters expect Jim to be ignorant, foolish, and dependent but he proves all such expectations wrong.

Speaking in the black vernacular, albeit a caricatured vernacular rendered by a white author, Jim performs several minstrel melodies as a “signifying” trickster. As part of the field slaves’ July Fourth celebrations, Jim sings the minstrel song “Ching a Ring Chaw” (1833) while playing the banjo: “Come, broders, let us leave / Dis Buckra lan for Hayti; / And dar we be receive / As gran as Lar-fay-i-tee. . . . / Dare no more barrow wheel . . . / Dar no more ‘bliged to steel” (Child 1.2). The song makes reference to the Haitian Revolution, the largest and most successful slave insurrection in the Western

hemisphere, with its overthrow of French colonial rule and abolishment of slave labor.⁸²

As “The Fillibusters’ Song” does, Jim’s “Ching a Ring Chaw” positions the U.S. within a transnational framework, making clear the connections between European imperialist powers, colonial sites throughout the Atlantic basin, and America’s emergence as a nation. What Robert Fanuzzi says of Child’s *Appeal* also applies to her melodrama: “[It] open[s] national boundaries to the history of foreign countries and insert[s] a correspondingly larger range of social configurations into our national identity” (99), allowing for a nuanced critique of American slavery as a facet of the globalized economic markets brought into being and fueled by colonialism.

Next, Jim performs a song that he “done got ready . . . spressly for dis ‘casion” (i.e. the 4th of July):

I hear massa tell ‘em so!
All de folks born free in dis’ere country, O!
But when I’ve ask if Jim born so,
Den my massa tell me no.
Mighty queer some tings I know,
If all folks born free in dis’ere country, O!
Dis nigger he know dat tings no go,
Jus as massa tole ‘em, O! (Child 1.2)

As readers will recognize, this is a variation on W. W. Brown’s “A Song for Freedom” (set to the music of the minstrel “Dandy Jim from Caroline”), which Cato sings in *The Escape*. Child borrows the song, which fits thematically with her play, as it points to the hypocrisy of slaveholders who celebrate the tradition of American liberty even as they abuse their slaves. Lastly, Jim appropriates “Adams and Liberty,” getting all the slaves to join in a chorus of “Fur ne’er shall de sons of Columby be slaves” (Child 1.2). At this, the slaveholders break things up with their whips, but Jim gets the last word when he comes

out of hiding from behind a tree to sing, “Hail Columby! *happy lan!*” in response to their despotic violence. Child’s iconoclastic approach reaches its full pitch in Jim’s trickster role. Using the ritual performance of song as a means of loaded expression, Jim “signifies” on his oppressors in an act of communal subversion, creating space for a black performative commons even under the restriction of slavery’s surveillance mechanisms. Slaveholders throughout the Atlantic world had long recognized the insurrectionary potential of black gatherings in which slaves expressed their collective discontent through music, so much so that colonies in the Caribbean and the South had legally banned the communicative use of drums and horns amongst their slave populations.⁸³ In this way, Jim’s character resonates strongly with what Dillon suggests may have been the originary roots of the minstrel tradition. As explained earlier, she proposes that blackface minstrel performance was often a controlling response on the part of whites to New World African performance rituals that subversively mocked white attitudes and behaviors (such as Jonkonnu parades in Jamaica and W. A. Brown’s productions at the African Grove in New York City). Jim re-appropriates minstrelsy in order to stage mocking critiques of white supremacist power, and if Dillon is right then his doing so returns imitative performance to the domain of black cultural resistance.

To be sure, Jim is a character of remarkable intelligence and subjective agency. When he comes to ask William’s wife, Ellen, to write him a pass to travel to a Methodist meeting (Jim is illiterate), they treat him as if he is a foolish, ignorant drunk. “I wish I could be as thoughtless as that merry fellow,” says William, to which his wife replies, “You can’t Willie, because you know too much” (Child 1.3). In reality, Jim is “sober’s deacon” and is using the pass as part of his scheme to run for freedom. He keeps singing

the minstrel tune “De Blue-Tailed Fly”⁸⁴ with the lyrics “Jim crack corn—don’t care! / Ole massa’s gone away!” not because he is drunk and merry but because Mr. Masters has left town providing Jim with the opportunity to flee. “De Blue-Tailed Fly” is a slave’s lament for the death of his master. The slave is told to swat flies from his master’s horse but hangs back when a large fly bites the steed. The master is thrown from his horse and dies after which the slave expresses his remorse and sorrow. Child plays heavily on the radical subtext of the song, which can be interpreted as celebrating the master’s death on the sly. Jim certainly celebrates Mr. Masters leaving town.

As it turns out, William and Ellen cannot make it to freedom without Jim’s crafty assistance. They meet near the Ohio River, by chance, and Jim invites the two to join in on his plan of crossing the river in barrels toted by his brother, Dick, whose master has hired him out to pull lumber. Once again, Jim appropriates various minstrel songs, this time using them as an ironic code. He sings, “Clar de track, ole Dan Tucker” to signal his brother, and Dick responds “Heighho! de boatmen row!” (Child 1.5). A masculine boasting song, “Ole Dan Tucker”⁸⁵ presents a gross caricature of an animalistic, hypersexualized black man. Here, Jim uses it to refer to their escape, much like the abolitionist ensemble, The Hutchinson Family Singers, whose popular, revised version of “Ole Dan Tucker” (1844) celebrated the Underground Railroad.⁸⁶ Dick’s song references “The Boatmen’s Dance,” another minstrel featuring a racist caricature, this time of a black boatman on the Ohio River who is “up to eb’rything.”⁸⁷ Rather than drinking, stealing, and philandering, though, Dick is “up to” assisting his fellow slaves escape to freedom. These minstrel performances parallel William’s earlier performance of supposed contentedness. Here, acting the stereotypical part of the happy minstrel slave becomes,

ironically, the very means to freedom and self-actualization. Jim also sings snippets of W. W. Brown's "A Song for Freedom" at pivotal junctures along the road to Canada while "signifying" on his master's language: "I say, Bill! massa couldn't *whip* us away, *could* he? *Tried* hard nuff, didn't he? Wouldn't *take* our freedom, if massa *guv* it to us, *would* we? [He sings:] / Dis nigger he know dat tings no go, / Jus as massa tole 'em, O!" (Child 1.5). By incorporating black performative strategies of resistance into her melodrama, Child (at least partially) transforms minstrel entertainment into an assertion of black selfhood that has the power to inspire white audiences to act, energized by Jim's creative manipulation of popular forms.

While Jim performs lively minstrel tunes, Ellen sings heartrending opera songs to express her sufferings and hopes as a slave. In a scene featuring an intimate conversation between Ellen and William, the latter vents not only his suffering but also his rebellious anger at having been beaten. Ellen switches between singing a plaintive song that melodramatizes the couple's emotional distress and a song of gaiety that is meant to ameliorate her husband's suffering. As in all melodrama, music functions quite literally as the language of compassion, or, as Child would say, "[T]he affections are everywhere the same; and music, being their voice, is a universal medium between human hearts" (*Selected Letters* 115). Ellen's song helps the audience to recognize the innocent victimization of the couple through sympathetic feeling. Whereas viewers of slavery melodramas are often asked to identify with suffering slaves through a white surrogate, such as Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or George in *The Octoroon*, here, readers are asked to identify with the empathy between two mixed-race characters, husband and wife. It must also be noted, however, that Ellen fits the "tragic mulatta" character type designed to

appeal to white female audiences. Such an identity is mapped onto Ellen's very body, as Child writes, "Being favorite personal attendants upon their master and mistress, [William and Ellen] have caught the language of genteel white people. . . . Ellen . . . has an air of refinement in her dress and motions" (1.3). In this instance, the moral valences conveyed through suffering innocence carry with them a disturbing racial marker.

Child pushes matters further, however, when exploring the subjective agency made visible through Ellen's suffering. Ellen confides that she has started to receive unwanted sexual attention from Mr. Masters, made more horrific by the fact that she is his daughter, so the rape would be incestuous. Mr. Masters's wife, suspicious of her husband's predilection for Ellen, has begun to mistreat her, having burned her flesh with hot wax. Unlike W. W. Brown's Melinda in *The Escape*, Ellen does not attempt physical rebellion. Nevertheless, Child does not shy away from addressing the conditions of women in slavery. As Karcher explains, Child "repeatedly . . . focuses on the special ways in which slavery victimizes women and makes a mockery of the domestic ideology glorifying 'true womanhood'" (185). Not only does Ellen face such a threat, she emphasizes that her mother did as well and she also worries that she and William will face a fate similar to Peggy and her husband. Mr. Masters coveted Peggy (another beautiful "mulatta" slave) in the past. In response to her sexual violation, Peggy's husband tried unsuccessfully to poison Mr. Masters, who then burned him alive in retaliation. In this way, Child intimates that Ellen's particular form of female suffering—and the terrorizing of the slave body generally—is not unique but an integral part of the slave system. While venting her fears, Ellen "sobs violently" in an iconographic display of passionate suffering centered on the feminized body of the melodramatic heroine

(Child 1.3). In addition to forging a sympathetic identification with Ellen on the part of the audience, her sobs facilitate the dialectic of pathos and action inherent to melodramatic form. Like Melinda's in *The Escape*, these tears are not an expression of powerlessness; they are the expedient that gives moral sanction to action. Williams explains, melodrama "channels the paroxysm of pathos into the more action-centered variants of the rescue, the chase, and the fight" (24), and, in this case, the flight.

It is in the action following Ellen's tears that this storyline differs from many works that are based on the "tragic mulatta" trope—for example, Child's own short story, "The Quadroons," and works that followed in its train, such as W. W. Brown's *Clotel* and Boucicault's *The Octoroon*. Unlike Boucicault's Zoe but similar to Brown's Melinda, Child's Ellen does not succumb to self-immolation or any other tragic fate; instead, her suffering causes her assertion of self-agency and moves her to action. Unlike Eliza from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who runs away to prevent the sale of her son, Ellen acts to save herself and does not need the justification of maternal obligation. Similar to the Crafts for whom they are named, Ellen and William escape to the North through their own ingenuity by disguising Ellen as a wealthy, white male and dressing William as her slave. They hatch this plan and implement it on the very same night of Ellen's plaintive singing and crying. In passing as a white man, Ellen succeeds in a whiteface, gender-bending performance based upon the Crafts's true escape and subsequent re-enactments of it on the stage. Unlike many melodramas featuring a "mulatta" heroine (*The Octoroon*), Child does not adhere to an ideology of racial determinism in her play but rather embraces racial indeterminacy, at least through Ellen's passing.⁸⁸ Thus, slavery is critiqued as a social condition rooted in dominant power relations, and *not* as the natural order of

things. With this plotline, Child also tweaks the convention of melodrama that McClosky embodies in *The Octoroon*. Rather than relying upon a singular villain, as Boucicault does, Child positions slavery as the entity that “unleashes a cosmic betrayal of the moral order and puts all appearances into question” (P. Brooks 34). Only immediate abolition, then, can restore moral legibility to American society.

On this note enter some of the play’s most important characters, Mr. Freeman and his fellow white, northern abolitionists. In a picnic scene designed to mirror that of the opening Independence Day festivity, William, Ellen, and Jim attend an abolitionist party celebrating the First of August. Also known as Emancipation Day, August First commemorates the day in 1834 when Great Britain abolished slavery in its West Indian colonies. The abolitionists are protecting the three fugitives while awaiting an opportunity to help them across the US border into Canada. Their evergreen arch has the word “EMANCIPATION” woven across it, a substitutional corrective to the “LIBERTY” arch at the July Fourth picnic of the slaveholders. In contrast to the rough drunkenness of the slaveholders, these partygoers are decidedly more temperate and respectable. Also, instead of whipping William for deigning to join the festivities, they invite him and Ellen to participate. Jim hides in a nearby icehouse as he cannot pass as white like William and Ellen and therefore be relatively safe from patrols on the search for fugitive slaves. Nevertheless, these abolitionists clearly prefer to “amalgamate” in their social activities to the horror of other northern white characters who distain interracial mixing of all sorts.⁸⁹ Asked to sing, Ellen and William choose “The Sunny South,” a poem by Elizur Wright, Jr., lamenting America’s failures in comparison to West Indian emancipation.⁹⁰ All of the picnic goers then sing “The Negro Is Free,” a British song commemorating

abolition.⁹¹ These songs parallel in contrast those sung by the slaveholders, such as “The Fillibusters’ Song,” and also further illuminate the transnational forces shaping American slavery. This scene forms a strong ritualistic performance of white abolitionist culture that would have appealed to Child’s audience of antislavery gift book readers, for these are activities in which they likely would have participated themselves time and time again.

The central figure of this performance is Mr. Freeman, a do-right “Yankee” who exhibits passionate abolitionist fervor. The “stage Yankee” was a comic character type hugely popular with American theater audiences, beginning with Jonathan Ploughboy in Royall Tyler’s *The Contrast* (1787). A national icon based on the New England farmer, the “Yankee” exhibited a mix of naivety and cunning, unabashed honesty, pride in his origins, and an intuitive ability to identify goodness. His function in melodrama, as seen in *The Stars and Stripes* and *The Octoroon*, is to recognize and protect virtue (Grimstead 186-188). As Nathans observes, the “Yankee” was paired onstage with the sentimental slave as early as Lazarus Beach’s *Jonathan Postfree; Or, The Honest Yankee* (1807) but took on a specifically antislavery dimension in the 1850s (137-157). The personas of the stage “Yankee” and the white abolitionist reformer united most forcefully in the actual person of Parker Pillsbury, a traveling antislavery lecturer who played up his attributes of common sense, plain speaking, and simple virtue (Nathans 161). Trowbridge’s *Neighbor Jackwood*, the antislavery melodrama of which Child was an admiring fan, “offers the closest parallel to the Yankee identity Pillsbury seems to have embodied” (Nathans 164). Jackwood engages in violent altercation to protect a fugitive slave.

As the honest protector of William, Ellen, and Jim, Mr. Freeman embodies this version of the “Yankee,” and it is quite possible that Child had Neighbor Jackwood in mind when writing his character (although the former is somewhat more sophisticated in his manners than his dramatic antecedents). Mr. Freeman even makes reference to his playing the “Yankee” himself: “I will imitate the Yankees, who, they say, answer one question by asking another” (Child 1.7). Mr. Freeman says this to a police officer who has asked him why he is loitering about. Their conversation illustrates Mr. Freeman’s clever “Yankee” ways:

Police Officer: What are you loitering about *here* for, sir?

Mr. Freeman: Pray, what are *you* loitering about here for?

Police Officer: We’re watching for two run-away niggers.

Mr. Freeman: Only *two*, sir? *Many* pass through this place to Canada.

A Truckman: Yes, and it’s all owing to the *cussed* jugglery of you bobolitionists and your friends, the niggers.

Mr. Freeman: I am happy to hear we are so useful. (Child 1.7)

So Mr. Freeman encapsulates the “insatiable curiosity,” “exaggerated bravado,” and predilection for idioms representative of this character type (Grimstead 188). His frequent dialogues with Mr. Masters and the police always prove him to be the shrewd one even if he seems initially to have gotten himself into hot water. In this way, he provides comic relief while also aiding the virtuous and innocent. His performance enacts a particular sort of white, northern identity that presumably would have appealed to Child’s abolitionist audience.

Such formulations have led scholars to comment on the fraught performance of white antislavery sentiment, ranging from lectures to mock slave auctions to plays. Many antislavery performances pivoted on the assumption that white northerners could be recruited through an image of the North as morally superior to the South. “Antislavery

sentiment itself, in other words, was a kind of self-fulfilling performance, one very much shaped by assumptions of white supremacy,” as Ernest asserts (xxxix). Mr. Freeman exudes an air of superiority toward white southerners as well as an air of paternalism toward fugitive slaves. He also comes across as essentially good as opposed to the evil Mr. Masters, setting up a moral hierarchy between the North and the South. Notably, there are no “good” white characters from the South. Such polarization is inherent to melodrama. Child does complicate matters, though, by also including morally defunct characters from the North. In doing this, she pushes her audience to recognize that white supremacy is rampant in every region of the U.S., offering a more self-critical representation of northern white identity in comparison to other slavery melodramas like *Neighbor Jackwood*. Take Mr. North, for example, who is meant to represent his region given his name. He befriends Mr. Masters and acquiesces to his lies about happy slaves who “can’t be whipped away” because he is content to maintain a status quo from which he benefits. Take also the violent truckmen who assist in the pursuit of the fugitive slaves, which helps to emphasize the extent to which the North is implicated in slavery due to the Fugitive Slave Law.⁹² Granting Mr. Freeman’s paternalism, Child also goes to great lengths to demonstrate that William, Ellen, and Jim would never achieve freedom without exerting their own agency, intelligence, and bravery.

Upon a closer look, the potential problems with the play’s representation of white identity comes not so much with its staging whiteness as different from abject blackness but with its assuming similarities between the two. For instance, Mr. Freeman re-appropriates the minstrel tunes sung by the fugitive slaves. Like Jim, he sings “Ole Dan Tucker” as a signal (he means for William and Ellen to hide in the icehouse, a stop on the

Underground Railroad, when Mr. Masters comes). Mr. Freeman attempts to forge a cross-racial alliance through the use of minstrelsy, as does Child throughout her play. It is likely that this approach results from Child's interest in black abolitionist performance strategies and perhaps speaks to the extent to which those strategies relied on perceived alliances between blacks and whites, whether sympathetic or political. Mr. Freeman's identification with black slaves is extensive, for he repeatedly slips into saying "*our* Southern masters" [emphasis mine] when discussing slave catching in particular and American liberty in general. To be sure, there is a rhetorical efficacy in showing that injustice affects even those who are not the immediate targets of oppression, as Child well knew. Here again, though, the greater aim seems to be to build a cross-racial alliance and move whites to act illegally, even violently if necessary, in solidarity with black slaves. An important question is whether or not Mr. Freeman's identification with the oppressed obfuscates their subjective selfhood or accomplishes the cross-racial solidarity that Child advocates. On the one hand, his emphasis on northern whites' political submission to the South obscures the fact that white (male) northerners maintained the privileged status of citizenship denied to blacks. Then again, some process of identification would seem to be necessary to cross-racial solidarity in action.

It is certainly necessary for the active co-operation between blacks and whites that takes place during the last leg of the fugitives' escape. In addition to re-appropriated minstrel songs, Child perhaps borrows another performance tactic from the black abolitionist "Box" Brown. The sensational "Mirror of Slavery," "Box" Brown's moving panorama that premiered on both sides of the Atlantic, centered on the re-enactment of his shipping himself in a box to freedom. As D. A. Brooks asserts, "the spectacle

reaffirmed African American appropriation of the black body, making that body ‘vanish’ in the midst of the panoptic culture of slavery” (121). Somewhat similarly, Jim makes his final escape to freedom by hiding in a coffin that is supposed to hold the dead body of a recently deceased African American reverend. William and Ellen “black up” their faces so that they can walk in the funeral procession without being recognized and captured. All three hide themselves in the reverend’s tomb while awaiting a ferry to Canada. Thus, the fugitives once more lay bare the instability of racial categorizations while also passing bodily from one state of being to another, life to death and back again. “Box” Brown often called his re-enactments of escape with the box “resurrections” and was repeatedly referred to as a Lazarus figure (D. A. Brooks 120, 122). Given this context, it is plausible that Child had “Box” Brown in mind when writing of Jim’s hiding in the coffin.

Such a performance is riddled with opposing states of existence. The space of confinement, the coffin or box, is also the path to freedom, inside of which, Jim is hidden but also on display in yet another kind of pageant, the funeral procession. This renders the slave passive and dependent yet it is also an integral part of his quest for self-agency. Figuratively dead, Jim awaits rebirth (as do William and Ellen in the tomb). As with “Box” Brown, “traveling entrapment” seems to offer “a signifying metaphor of physical resistance to the antebellum period’s rigorous literal and figurative colonization of black bodies” (D. A. Brooks 67). One is also reminded, here, of Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative in which she details hiding in a cramped garret as a part of her escape to freedom (Child would later become the editor of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*). On the surface, Jim’s actions seem reminiscent of those strategies of black performance, “coded with

traumas of self-fragmentation . . . in which the condition of alterity converts into cultural expressiveness” (D. A. Brooks 5). Yet, here, the problems with the play’s cross-racial alliances rear their head. Unlike “Box” Brown, Jim does not imagine such an escape for himself; instead, the tactic is credited to a white abolitionist friend of Mr. Freeman’s. What’s more, Jim is rendered silent not only within the coffin but also for the rest of play (he only has one subsequent line at the play’s close). Mr. Freeman, quite literally, steals the funeral scene, which centers almost wholly on his shrewd foiling of the slave-hunting police and truckmen. While “Box” Brown’s embodied performance concluded with his bursting from the box in triumphant song, a powerful demonstration of his subjective agency, Jim slides into obscurity, occluded by Mr. Freeman’s performance of white antislavery sentiment.

The final scene of the play also depends on cross-racial solidarity and yet is not without its contradictions as well. The play ends in a dramatic tableau characteristic of melodrama, showing William, Ellen, and Jim fleeing the U.S. on board a ferry as virtuous crowds who sympathize with them cheer from both shorelines, while the villainized slave owner and his police cronies are foiled for the last time. When the fugitives first board the ferry and Mr. Masters enters waving a gun at the ferryman, William threatens physical violence. “I’ll strangle you, if you do,” he warns the ferryman who hesitates and nearly turns back to American shores (Child 1.8). The ferryman responds, “If I *must* die, I’ll die doing my *duty*,” and he moves for the Canadian shore while the white abolitionists wrestle the gun from Mr. Masters.⁹³ This show of cross-racial solidarity, very nearly erupting into united violence, secures the slaves’ freedom. Child underscores the processes of identification that have led to such an alliance. Mr. Freeman borrows

another line from Jim, shouting to Mr. Masters, “Couldn’t *whip* ‘em away from you; *could* you, sir?” (Child 1.8). Then, he shouts to the police officer, “Didn’t catch a weasel asleep *this* time, did we?” (Child 1.8). While the first taunt points to the suffering slaves’ resistance, the second refers to the white abolitionist attempts to undermine the southern political power by which they feel oppressed due to the 1850 Compromise with its harsh Fugitive Slave Law. The latter point is enhanced through allusion, for the backdrop to this scene is a large ship floating at the stocks with a banner that reads “Henry Clay.”⁹⁴ The juxtaposition of these two lines by Mr. Freeman points to a perceived shared position between white and black. Accordingly, as Jim sings, “*Ole* massa’s gone away,” the white abolitionists sing “The Negro Is Free” in a simultaneous display of white and ostensibly black antislavery ritual. In a jeremiadical thrust, Child intimates that the principles of republican liberty on which the nation is founded are possible to reclaim if only ritual identification can be made to move white citizens towards interracial solidarity and action.

Perhaps the entire play is designed to offer audiences an opportunity to practice such ritual identification. As Gardner suggests, this play (published in an antislavery gift book) could have easily lent itself to “small amateur (family or social) theatricals” (440). I find this to be quite likely given the many familiar songs and melodies, the relatively small cast of characters, and the simplified stage directions and settings.⁹⁵ With this unique virtual acting scenario, Child inserts antislavery ritual into the personal, domestic space of the home and invites women (and perhaps children) to participate in dramatic performance at a time when to do so publically brought censure. She thereby enables them to play at roles that they otherwise did not have the opportunity to “put on,” so to

speak. The strategy has transformative potential, as we saw with Charlotte Barnes playing Pocahontas, for the role-playing that performative engagement provides has long been pointed to in performance studies as enabling social change. As Deloria acknowledges in his discussion of whites “playing Indian,” “Disguise readily calls the notion of fixed identity into question. At the same time, however, wearing a mask also makes one self-conscious of a real ‘me’ underneath. This simultaneous experience is both precarious and creative” (7). Performing the roles in Child’s melodrama, then, may have been a way for white abolitionist families to play at constructing new identities.

Such a scenario is not without problems, however, especially considering the play’s particular racial dynamics. Given the prominence of Mr. Freeman and the brand of white abolitionist identity for which he stands, the play seems targeted towards a white audience (though this sense cannot be taken for granted since Child often wrote for a black and/or mixed-race audience). Nevertheless, white abolitionists playing the role of Mr. Freeman would have been engaging in a self-defining performance that could have bolstered their sense of moral superiority, perhaps even leading to a self-satisfied feeling of self-righteousness that could weaken the impetus to action Child likely intends. More problematically, in playing the roles of William and Ellen, white abolitionists would be placing themselves in the position of the racialized other, perhaps imagining their sufferings as their own and thereby occluding the distinct exploitation of the black slave body. Most problematically, in playing the role of Jim, white abolitionists would, essentially, be engaging in a caricatured blackface performance complicit with minstrelsy’s racism.⁹⁶ Similar to Mr. Freeman, such amateur performers would be

participating in a ritual that, ostensibly, opens common ground between blacks and whites but, actually, denies black selfhood.⁹⁷

Child's entire strategy throughout the play is to deploy familiar rituals—re-appropriations of minstrel songs, patriotic songs, holiday pageantries, and spectacles of the suffering slave body—as shared cultural forms in order to forge cross-racial alliances. Jim is a fun and sympathetic character, but he lacks the complexity of W. W. Brown's Cato, for instance, not to mention that of "Box" Brown's stage persona. Though Child's interest in black performative strategies of resistance and willingness to incorporate them into her own work are radical moves, going far beyond the conservatism of *The Octoroon*, *Neighbor Jackwood*, or even *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they pose a problem of which she may have been unaware. In re-enacting black performance strategies (herself in writing them and once again in inviting other white abolitionists to perform them), Child risks repeating the cultural theft of which minstrelsy itself smacks. Karen Sanchez-Eppler's insights are relevant here: "The difficulty of preventing moments of identification from becoming acts of appropriation constitutes the essential dilemma of feminist abolitionist rhetoric" (20). Additionally, it is interesting to note Karcher's comments on Child's use of purported black musical forms in her novel *A Romance of the Republic* (1867):

[It] testifies starkly to the stranglehold that the genteel canons of white middle-class culture exerted on [Child's] imagination. Once again, she was visualizing the incorporation of black elements into a white art form—or the appropriation of black culture by whites—rather than the genuine merging of black and white elements in a new art form created by African Americans themselves. (527)

So ritual identification becomes an act of appropriation that obscures the black subject, and in the case of *The Stars and Stripes*, the black performance artist-activist. However, in contrast to *A Romance of the Republic*, Child is not simply taking minstrel songs as they were written and performed by whites with her play but is instead much more substantially engaging with black culture via W. W. Brown, “Box” Brown, and the Crafts.

In explicating the play’s limitations when it comes to embodied racial identities, I do not mean to minimize Child’s efforts. It is precisely in her incorporation of black strategies of resistance that the play moves beyond the obligatory sympathy demanded by the suffering slave to black agency. Also, her attempts to move white Americans to act for racial equality through the shared rituals of melodrama’s exhilarating pathos and action-packed sequences speaks to an important, yet often overlooked, use of melodrama. The sharing of cultural forms *is* a strong way, if not a necessary way, of establishing cross-racial solidarity. Perhaps Child’s play can help illustrate the pitfalls and the promises of using melodramatic forms for such a purpose. Child knew her own New England abolitionist culture quite well and this play demonstrates her adeptness at remolding its expectations. Through the intellectual appeal of ironic juxtapositions paired with rousing popular forms, Child seems more concerned with transforming white identity than representing black identity in this particular play. Her use of national symbols, rituals, and well-known songs works to mobilize the arsenal of her specific culture for radical action, evincing her exasperation with the way that talk had not translated into change. *The Stars and Stripes* was Child’s attempt to use melodrama’s

contentious search for moral legibility as an opportunity to break that deadlock as sectional tensions were brimming into civil war.

When it comes to the pathos of sensationalized suffering, the creators of 1850s slavery melodramas take a variety of approaches to move their audiences to sympathy and excitement, testifying to the versatility of melodramatic enactment. Antebellum Americans engaged in the contentious ritual of national identity formation through the popular performances of afflicted octoroons, minstrelized “darkies,” signifying tricksters, rebellious heroines, hypocritical slavers, lascivious masters, vengeful mistresses, northern interlopers, and do-right Yankees. Sometimes those identity formations sought to bolster existing power relations and occlude destabilizing hybridizations. At other times, they embraced the slipperiness of embodied significations within the history of New World colonialism. Nevertheless, whether audiences came to witness Boucicault’s sensational explosions and sexual titillations, W. W. Brown’s bold ribaldry and witty playfulness, or Child’s intellectual thought and rousing songs, they were sure to partake in melodrama’s distinctive brand of raucous entertainment. The slavery plays examined here illuminate the diverse ways in which melodramatic conventions were deployed to stage contentious versions of moral legibility to the conflicts engendered by America’s “peculiar” institution: certain character types might simultaneously elicit sympathy for the slave while reinforcing white hegemony through melodrama’s paradoxical resolutions; comic performance might be paired with melodramatic pathos in order to champion black agency and rebellion; or, popular melodramatic rituals might be provocatively infused with rational critique to illustrate how American identities are shaped by the violent legacy of the nation’s founding colonial history. As it develops into a mature and robust

form, melodrama's search for moral legibility becomes increasingly equivocal and self-reflexive. In all of its varieties, however, melodrama provided a means of mapping shifting moral significations onto the embodied performance of racial identity, and this came to be a defining feature of American culture in the nineteenth century. As a dominant cultural mode, melodrama continues to influence how we think, talk, and act about race in America today.

CONCLUSION

Anyone living in America now is aware of the fraught social relations that continue to define our politics and culture. Controversies over police brutality, immigration enforcement policies, Native land rights, and women's equality are reflected in the formation of Black Lives Matter, lawsuits against refugee and immigrant bans, the alliance of Native Nations Rise, and the organization of the Women's March on Washington, D.C. Amidst such contentions, melodrama's search for moral legibility continues to unfold, offering a shared system of meaning-making that allows for dissent and contradiction in its embodied types and symbols. Its mode of ritual performance often can be seen in the ways that race and gender are represented on television, film, news programs, and social media. From time to time, American theater still provides a crucible for such ritual performances, as is the case with Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop musical *Hamilton* (2015), which tells the story of America's revolutionary origins through the eyes of the founding father best known for writing *The Federalist Papers* and creating the nation's financial system.

Fusing hip-hop, R&B, pop, and show tunes, *Hamilton* transforms arcane Cabinet debates into raucous rap battles in the spirit of artists such as Nas, Jay Z, Tupac, and Eminem and outdated marriage customs into rapturous love songs influenced by the likes

of Ja Rule, Ashanti, Method Man, and Mary J. Blige. Tickets to the show are the hardest to land in the country, and the production has also been catapulted to fame beyond the theater world. An absolute cultural phenomenon, *Hamilton* has won a Pulitzer Prize and eleven Tony Awards, while its double platinum cast album has made history for its debut and rise on the *Billboard 200* chart. *The Hamilton Mixtape* (2016), an assortment of rap/R&B songs from the musical performed by various iconic artists and executive produced by Questlove of the The Roots, has been even more successful. Given the show's wide appeal to traditional New York theatergoers, political leaders, the hip-hop community, and urban youth alike, Miranda has been invited for guest performances at venues ranging from *Saturday Night Live* to the White House. The musical illustrates in the most vibrant way that melodrama thrives in the twenty-first century.

The production makes use of the melodramatic conventions established during the period of America's national formation. It presents historical figures as victim heroes, virtuous heroines, and dissembling villains in alternating scenes of pathos and action that encompass war battles, political intrigue, high-pitched romance, illicit affairs, and deadly duels. Opening with a rap about Alexander Hamilton's (Lin-Manuel Miranda) youth on the hurricane-torn, slave-driven Caribbean island of St. Croix, Aaron Burr (Leslie Odom, Jr.) characterizes the founding father as a suffering immigrant who rises through struggle to become a revolutionary hero and an architect of the new nation's democratic government:

How does a bastard, orphan, son
of a whore and a
Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten
Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impover-
ished, in squalor,

Grow up to be a hero and scholar?
The ten-dollar Founding
 Father without a father
Got a lot farther by working a lot harder
By being a lot smarter
By being a self-starter (Miranda and McCarter 16)⁹⁸

Relying upon the ever-cherished American value of self-reliance, this melodramatic portrayal draws a parallel between Hamilton and America itself as a way of mythologizing the country's origins. The virtuous heroine Eliza Schuyler (Phillipa Soo) recognizes Hamilton's virtue and marries him. As Ron Chernow (the author of the Hamilton biography that inspired Miranda to write the play) says of Eliza, she is "pure goodness" (qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 107). Eliza's sister Angelica (Renée Elise Goldsberry) plays the role of the active, rebellious heroine. According to Miranda, she is the smartest character in the play, and she has the most difficult rap bars (Miranda and McCarter 79). Her voice bears the influence of the mother of hip-hop, Queen Latifah. Angelica is nearly as intrepid as Hamilton and levels piercing criticisms of her country's patriarchal power relations:

I've been reading "Common Sense"
 by Thomas Paine.
So men say that I'm intense or I'm insane.
You want a revolution? I wanna revelation
So listen to my declaration:
We hold these
 truths to be self-evident
That all men are created equal.
And when I meet Thomas Jefferson,
I'm 'a compel him to include
women in the sequel! (Miranda and McCarter 44)

When Angelica raps these lines, she is publically confronting Aaron Burr, the play's antagonist, who kills Hamilton in a duel. In an act of self-nomination characteristic to

melodrama, Burr proclaims, “I’m the villain in your history” (Miranda and McCarter 275). Burr is characterized as dissembling and hypocritical, switching political allegiances as it suits him. As Hamilton says of Burr in comparison to Thomas Jefferson (his “Diametric’lly opposed [political] foe”): “But when all is said and all is done. / Jefferson has beliefs. / Burr has none” (Miranda and McCarter 186, 262). This is not to say that Miranda does not treat Burr sympathetically. In more ways than one, the playwright embraces the contradictions inherent to both American history and melodrama. For example, actors of diverse ethnicities play the founding fathers, and their embodied (ontic) performances destabilize popular constructions of American identity and simultaneously express the hope of a multiracial, egalitarian democracy. As is so often the case with melodrama, *Hamilton* returns to the past in its attempts to locate a virtuous legacy for the nation. It is, therefore, traditional in the sense that it doesn’t “reinvent the American character” so much as “renew it” (Miranda and McCarter 284).

Miranda questions the project of telling history through a melodramatic lens, however, by complicating the character of Eliza. She dramatizes the act of writing history in a way that emphasizes its performative nature. Following the breaking news of Hamilton’s scandalous affair with Maria Reynolds (Jasmine Cephas Jones), Eliza burns her epistolary correspondence with her husband and sings: “I’m erasing myself from the narrative. / Let future historians wonder / How Eliza reacted when you broke her heart. / You have torn it all apart. / I am watching it / Burn” (Miranda and McCarter 238). The lyrics highlight the unavoidable gaps in any historical narrative, pointing to how those narratives are shaped by subjective perspective as well as the compromised processes of material documentation. When Hamilton dies, Eliza re-inserts herself into the historical

record as the storyteller of Hamilton's legacy, as indicated by the title of the melodrama's final song, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?" As the virtuous heroine, Eliza is the heart of the melodrama and is perhaps most fit to tell its story as she instinctively sees the contours of its moral legibility. Yet her final song also demonstrates how precarious any version of such a history necessarily is. This self-reflexivity enables the musical to interrogate itself, testifying to melodrama's robust form.

Melodrama is also versatile because it continually enfolds other popular forms into itself, thereby infusing new life into its conventions. As a hip-hop musical, *Hamilton* makes use of rap in its structure and content, and this is largely considered to be its most distinctive feature. Rap, an American musical form with cultural roots in the African diaspora, allows for contention and agreement through interactive performance. Perhaps this is thrown most sharply into relief by the rap battle or cypher in which emcees (slang for masters of ceremony) stage off against one another in a series of lyrical improvisations, or freestyles, judged by audience members. Such performances are often melodramatized. For instance, *Summer Madness 2* (2012) at Webster Hall in New York City, organized by the rap battle leagues SMACK and URL, featured a cypher between Loaded Lux and Calicoe in which the former entered the stage dressed as the leader of a funeral procession with a full train of mourners and a casket for his opponent. The most famous rap battle in the history of hip-hop was that between New York rappers Nas and Jay Z, encapsulated in two album tracks that are archetypical of the battle rap genre, Nas's "Ether" (2001) and Jay Z's "Takeover" (2001). Miranda has said that he listened to both songs (amazingly intricate in their lyrical density) on a loop while writing *Hamilton* (*Hamilton's America*). At one point, Nas tried to stage an effigy of Jay Z hanging from a

noose while performing “Ether” but was prevented from doing so by the venue’s management. Such deathly figurations represent the potential for violence inherent to the form. The battle between East coast and West coast rap, for instance, erupted into armed conflicts that took the lives of several young men.

This is the tradition that Miranda draws upon when writing songs such as “Cabinet Battle #1” in which Jefferson (Daveed Diggs) and Hamilton debate the newly appointed Treasury Secretary’s plan to assume state debt and establish a national bank. In so doing, Miranda positions rap as a distillation of the democratic contention inherent to American identity. Jefferson charges:

His plan would have the government assume
states’ debts. . . .
If New York’s in debt—
Why should Virginia bear it?
Uh! Our debts are paid I’m afraid.
Don’t tax the South cuz we got it made in
the shade.
In Virginia, we plant seeds in the ground.
We create. You just wanna move our money
around.
This financial plan is an outrageous demand.
And it’s too many damn pages for any man
to understand. (Miranda and McCarter 161)

And, Hamilton victoriously responds:

If we assume the debts, the Union gets a new
line of credit, a financial diuretic.
How do you not get it? If we’re aggressive and
competitive
The Union gets a boost. You’d rather give it a
sedative?
A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor.
Your debts are paid cuz you don’t pay for labor.
‘We plant seeds in the South. We create.’ Yeah,
keep ranting.
We know who’s really doing the planting. (Miranda and McCarter 161)

The battle encapsulates financial debates that continue to shape American political discourse. At the same time, it lays bare the shameful contradictions in America's founding as a self-proclaimed free nation that relied upon slave labor. The fact that Jefferson is played by Diggs, an African American actor, raises the stakes. His embodied performance acts as a powerful reminder of Jefferson's problematic legacy, which included the ownership of over two hundred people, even as the historical perspective offered by his character resonates with American values. Miranda and Diggs have commented upon the engagement and delight of vociferous theatergoers in response to the battle, which, as Miranda notes, helps to facilitate a cathartic experience for both actors and audiences (Miranda and McCarter 161).

Miranda uses rap as the medium for his musical not only due to its dramatic potential but also because of its capacity for rich storytelling. Like Hamilton, the rappers who have inspired Miranda are hustlers who have lived fast and hard while transforming their life stories into "the music of ambition, the soundtrack of defiance" (Miranda and McCarter 21). In other words, these rappers have used their poetic abilities to rise above their stations. As Hamilton raps in regards to his rise from orphaned immigrant to successful scholar-politician, "I wrote my way out" (Miranda and McCarter 232). The personas created by hip-hop's lyrical storytellers inform Miranda's characters. As Diggs explains, "When you're developing your voice as a rapper, you figure out your cadence—your swag—and that's how you write. Lin managed to figure that out for *all* of these different characters—everyone has their own swag, and it feels germane to them" (qtd. in Binelli). In the case of Hamilton, for example, Miranda comments:

[He] was always the son of Rakim. That rhyme style, which goes from Rakim to Big Pun to Eminem: multi-syllabic, where it's not enough to rhyme only at the end of the rhyme, but also becomes about finding as many internal cadences within the line as possible. (qtd. in Binelli)

Hamilton's style expresses his adept deployment of language as a polemical writer as well as his hyperactive, impetuous spirit. Both Miranda and Hamilton are/were residents of New York City, and the towering icon of New York rap, the Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls, is alluded to most often in the musical. "Ten Duel Commandments" explains the rules of the *code duello* in a thrilling adaptation of Biggie's "Ten Crack Commandments," for example. In a virtuoso display of lyrical ability, Biggie tells the story of what he has learned about selling crack cocaine as a manual on how to overcome poverty. Similarly, Hamilton's life story illustrates what it takes to make it in a world where the cards are stacked against you. Both Biggie and Hamilton died at tragically young ages, one in an unsolved murder and the other in a fateful duel, and so Miranda's song draws a parallel between a rap legend and an American founding father. As it should in a melodrama, the music structures the narrative and heightens the emotional response of its audience.

As a form that translates emotional excess into gestures that articulate truths beyond the signifying capacity of language, melodrama's excitement lies in its physical performance. The set designs and choreography of *Hamilton* do not disappoint. Evoking eighteenth-century New York City, the moveable set fashioned by David Korins is comprised of a mix of masonry, lumber, and ropes that references the architectural design of a colony that was built by immigrants who learned their craft as shipbuilders (*Hamilton's America*). The stage contains two giant turntables upon which the actors

move and dance, whirled around in a dizzying display of intensified action. Andy Blankenbeuhler created the choreography for the musical in what he melodramatically describes as “stylized heightened gesture” and what his associate, Stephanie Klemons, calls a “3-D Imax fresco” (qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 134). Blankenbeuhler’s dance sequences express emotional ideas that are exaggerated into a heightened state and then physicalized through amplified movement. “Dance is . . . a framing device that matches emotionally what I want the audience to feel,” he says (Blankenbeuhler qtd. in Miranda and McCarter 134). Other choreographic elements point to the cosmic truths that melodrama always attempts to reveal: “Seeing the two-part turntable installed and spinning . . . Andy was delighted with all the subtle effects it could create: Counterclockwise motion, he felt, suggested the passage of time; clockwise suggested resistance to the inevitable” (Miranda and McCarter 135). Such grandiose effects lend themselves perfectly to casting America’s origins in the mold of myth. In melodramatic fashion, the innovative staging of the musical intensifies audience sensations.

Embodied performance enriches and complicates the meaning of *Hamilton* in potent ways. The melodrama has received an extraordinary amount of attention for having actors of color, predominately African Americans and Latinx, play the country’s founding fathers. This strategy enables Miranda to maximize the contradictory potentialities of drama’s mimetic and ontic registers. As Dillon explains, “the thingly quality of the materiality of the theatrical sign can begin to unwind mimesis—can offer a challenge to the very script that is being performed, or, at the very least, begin to send a script in an entirely new and unexpected direction” (50). Reflecting Miranda’s heritage as the son of Puerto Rican immigrants, *Hamilton* does precisely this with its representation

of America's founding through a cast comprised of diverse ethnicities. The mimetic representation of Hamilton as an immigrant from the West Indies who got his start in a trading charter that operated within the colonial slave economy points to the movement of bodies and identities across the colonial world of the eighteenth century. Similarly, Miranda's ontic presence on stage points to the movement of bodies across western geographies today (including former colonies) in Hispanic migration patterns. In this way, the melodrama's mimetic and ontic registers lay bare the colonial relations underpinning America's history even as they continue to shape contemporary realities. As a result, we can see American diversity today as a legacy of America's democratic origins, marked by colonialism but ironically holding the promise of a multiracial, egalitarian republic. Likewise, Diggs's physical presence as an actor playing Jefferson underscores the dependence of the founding president's white power as derived from the labor performed by the colonized black slave body. When Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette (also played by Diggs) perform together in the battle of Yorktown, remarking "Immigrants: We get the job done," they present a vision of America's past that posits the diverse mixing of peoples which resulted from colonialism as integral to the project of American democracy (Miranda and McCarter 121). This establishes an alliance between the two figures (both the characters and the actors) that carries revolutionary potential for today's world.

The effect is empowering, and audiences recognize its force. So much so that two extra bars of music had to be added in the live performance following the line "Immigrants: We get the job done" to make space for theatergoers' raucous cheers. The line has also ended up on signboards in recent political protests, including the one that

occurred outside of the Rodgers Theatre on the night that President-elect Mike Pence attended *Hamilton*. As Leslie Odom, Jr. (the African American actor who plays Burr) comments regarding the overall significance of having actors of color play America's first presidents, "It is quite literally taking the history that someone has tried to exclude us from and reclaiming it. We are saying we have the right to tell it too" (qtd. in Binelli). During the play's debut, audiences viscerally reacted to the sight of George Washington's (Chris Jackson) Continental Army, played by blacks and Latinx, win their freedom: "People wept at intermission. They screamed at the finale. In the cramped lobby afterwards, you could hear a potent chatter of emotions: euphoria, disbelief, desperation" (Miranda and McCarter 113). Reflecting on what it may have been like for him to watch a black man play Jefferson or Washington or Madison as a kid, Diggs says, "A whole lot of things I just never thought were for me would have seemed possible" (Miranda and McCarter 149).

Such possibility has inspired the creators and producers of *Hamilton* to organize an unprecedented outreach to the students of New York public schools. Having obtained a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, they are bringing twenty thousand students, a large percentage of whom receive free or reduced lunches, to see the show on Broadway. The response has already proven the impact of the project. Students have created their own performances based on the play, transforming political arguments on topics like same-sex marriage and gun control into rap battles that they enact for their communities. Theatrical licensing organizations predict that school performances of *Hamilton* are likely to take place at the rate of six or seven hundred per year (Miranda and McCarter 160). When students go to see *Hamilton*, they react most strongly to the cabinet battles. They

recognize their own culture in the performance and they behave just like you are supposed to behave at a cypher: they yell, hiss, boo, and cheer. The actors reportedly love playing for audiences that “don’t know the rules” of proper theater decorum (Miranda and McCarter 157). In our contemporary moment, melodrama continues to be a prolific and raucous entertainment.

NOTES

¹ See Christopher Mele and Patrick Healy for a news report of Pence's attendance at *Hamilton*, including a video of this speech. The transcription of the speech is my own.

² I borrow the term "performative commons" from Elizabeth Maddock Dillon who defines it this way: "The theatre was . . . a space at which large numbers of common (and elite) people gathered with regularity and, thus, a space at which the body of the people was, literally, materialized. Moreover, the people not only gathered at the theatre, but also performed themselves as a people in the space of the theatre. . . . [Thus] the 'theatre' of the physical commons [that is the land that had been held in common in England] was, in some sense, replaced by the theatre itself in the eighteenth century—the location at which a new performative commons appeared" (Dillon 4).

³ See David Grimstead for more information about the make-up of crowds at antebellum theaters and their rowdy behavior (48-75).

⁴ James Dormon offers substantial evidence that despite occasional objections and official regulations (made by whites, of course), both free and enslaved African Americans were a part of most every theater audience in the period. There are many recorded episodes of Native Americans attending the theater in the periodicals of the time, which are discussed throughout my dissertation.

⁵ See Mark Victor Mullen for a fascinating and thorough account of antebellum theaters that explains more fully these architectural designs and special effects based on extensive research on nineteenth-century American theaters and visits to Thalian Hall in Wilmington, North Carolina and the Philadelphia Academy of Music (*Sympathetic Vibrations* 98-154).

⁶ Mullen makes a similar point about melodrama's distributive reach with other examples. For instance, the first run of George Aiken's melodramatic adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) drew twenty-five thousand spectators to the Troy Museum Theatre in its first run alone, at a time when the population of Troy only totaled thirty thousand (Mullen, "Making an Exception" 37).

⁷ I adapt the term “moral legibility” from Peter Brooks and Linda Williams, the two most influential critics of melodrama, who use it to refer to the ways in which melodrama seeks to articulate a cosmic order that is no longer accessible in the belief systems of sacred myth since the advent of modern secularization. I rethink the term “moral legibility,” however, and use it in a new way to indicate the extent to which melodrama’s paradoxical resolutions are caught up in an interactive and contentious performance network. Neither Brooks nor Williams discuss moral legibility in this way nor do they focus their discussion on the rise of melodrama in the first half of nineteenth-century America.

⁸ The “yeoman farmer” of Jeffersonian myth was a virtuous citizen and independent producer, a figure that virtually collapsed the difference between self-made success and the good of commonwealth, and thus embodied the antinomies of liberalism and republicanism. The “Yankee,” or Jonathan as the character was almost always named, was created by Royall Tyler in his play *The Contrast* (1787) and subsequently appeared in numerous plays throughout the antebellum period. Jonathan is the “type” of primitive American goodness, a naive bumpkin who has lived outside citified life but who has the moral sense, forthrightness, and independent spirit to outwit the villains.

⁹ Roach uses the term “surrogation” in his study of the syncretic performance traditions of the Americas, Africa, and Europe. Surrogation refers to the process of ritualized substitution that occurs as “actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (Roach 2). Asserting its centrality to nineteenth-century, circum-Atlantic theater, Roach conceives of surrogation as the way in which culture is reproduced through public dramas hinging on repeated substitution (3).

¹⁰ In contrast to the southern colonies, the Puritan colonies of New England passed restrictions and bans on theatrical performance, which they generally viewed as immoral and corrupt. Theatrical performances date to the early beginnings of the southern colonies and the documented existence of theaters there dates to the early eighteenth century. For an historical account of the beginnings of drama in colonial America, see Meserve (11-59).

Despite their restrictions and bans, however, the Puritans were somewhat conflicted in their sentiments regarding theatricality. Richards suggests that this likely had to do with the fact that Puritan preachers had to compete with the theaters, which typically staged plays on the Sabbath and threatened to divert citizens from their work and spiritual commitments: “the closeness to which Puritan rhetoric and style sometimes approach the theatrical suggests a deep ambivalence about the theater and about the intrusion of theatricality into daily life” (79).

¹¹ Of course, it is not the case that all Puritan individuals held such views or experienced such anxieties. In fact, some leading ministers, such as John Cotton, argued against the

concept of visible sainthood, emphasizing internal processes of regeneration. Nonetheless, many Puritan works of literature, including those discussed here, show that visible sainthood and Manicheanism were concepts that exerted strong influence on Puritan culture as a whole.

¹² Bercovitch defines the jeremiad as a sermon that illustrates an ideal biblical standard, outlines how people have fallen from that standard, and then envisions a return to the ideal state. Alternating between the evocation of fear through the threat of damnation and of hope through the potential of salvation, the preacher seeks to restore and unify the community (*American Jeremiad* 16).

¹³ Increase Mather represents a dominant strain of historical thinking amongst New England colonists, but not all Puritans conceived of history as a manifestation of God's will. The minister William Hubbard, for example, was hesitant to apply theological frameworks so surely and specifically to the historical events unfolding in the colonies. His *A Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians of New England* (1677) provides a more restrained and ambiguous account of the war (Stratton 102).

¹⁴ The original title in its entirety reads *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson; Commended by Her, to All that desires to Know the Lords Doings to, and Dealings with her; Especially to her Dear Children and Relations, The Second Edition Corrected and Amended, Written by Her Own hand for Her Private Use, and Now Made Publick at the Earnest Desire of Some Friends, and for the Benefit of the Afflicted* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1682). This first edition is no longer extant and the title was revised in later editions.

¹⁵ I borrow the term "simulations" from Anishinaabe writer and theorist Gerald Vizenor who, based on the fact that "the word [Indian] has no referent in tribal languages or cultures," asserts that the Indian is not real but "an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation" (11). Representations of the Indian in European and American historical accounts, then, can be seen as "simulations of dominance" (Vizenor 4).

¹⁶ As Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola writes in the introduction to her collection of captivity narratives, "The influential Puritan minister Increase Mather almost certainly sponsored Rowlandson's narrative, wrote its preface, and arranged for its publication" (5).

¹⁷ The term "noble savage" described man in his natural state as yet uncorrupted by the social stresses of civilized life and reflected the sentimentalist belief in the inherent goodness of people. Dryden coined the phrase in his drama *The Conquest of Granada* (1672). Other thinkers and philosophers, such as Michel de Montaigne, the Earl of Shaftesbury, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau popularized the notion of man living in

untainted bliss, surrounded by the benevolence of nature, prior to the advent of civilization. Throughout the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century, the “noble savage” trope was increasingly racialized in that it was applied to Native Americans in order to signify their supposedly inevitable extinction or “vanishing” in the face of Western civilization’s progress—a myth that helped to deny the reality of genocidal violence.

¹⁸ In writing *Metamora*, Stone was also probably influenced by earlier writings sympathetic to Native Americans, such as Washington Irving’s “Philip of Pokanoket” (1820) and James Wallace Eastburn’s and Robert Charles Sands’s *Yamoyden: A Tale of the Wars of King Philip* (1820).

¹⁹ Despite the large profits *Metamora* generated, Forrest refused to pay Stone more than the prize money, and their relationship soured. This did not stop Forrest from building a monument to Stone when the latter committed suicide a few years later, possibly due to financial difficulties (Grimstead 168).

²⁰ Even such cruelties as these obscure the actual horrors of history. Colonial forces seized Metacomet’s body after killing him and dismembered him, sending his hands to Boston and his head to Plymouth where it was displayed on a spike at the gates of the town for many years. Metacomet’s wife and child were sold into slavery in the West Indies.

²¹ Jill Lepore, Teresa Strouth Gaul, Jeffrey Mason, and B. Donald Grose are among the critics who make such arguments. See Scott C. Martin for a full summation of this critical discussion (79-80).

²² McConachie demonstrates that the ideal of the “yeoman farmer” as an independent producer who collapses the difference between liberal individualism and republican equality (in this model self-made success benefits the commonwealth) was reflected in the heroic melodramas of the Jacksonian era, especially those starring Forrest.

²³ See Todd Vogel for another consideration of Apess and his work through a theatrical lens that takes *Metamora* into account (40-64).

²⁴ Slotkin features Bird’s novel in his examination of the frontier myth, while Curtis Dahl and Robert Winston disparage it for what they see as its overly romantic elements (which are actually related to its melodramatic form, but Winston does not mention this at all). Joan Hall’s and Gary Hoppenstand’s discussions place Bird’s *Nick* within the novelistic conventions mentioned. Dana Nelson provides a valuable reading of the texts racial configurations as they pertain to the formation of national character within the tradition of the frontier adventure novel. *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Filmic Monsters* describes the novel as gothic fiction. Only Mullen comments at some length on

the melodramatic aspects of the text, but his reading contrasts with mine as he sees Nathan as a much more indeterminate character and also argues that the novel's ambiguous aspects cannot be resolved since it has limited recourse to melodramatic formulations.

²⁵ Citing several periodicals, Bank demonstrates that Medina's work was well reviewed in the press and that her powers of adaption received high praise, particularly her ability to improve upon the plots of the novels she adapted and her keen sense of theatrical effect ("Theatre and Narrative Fiction" 57). Rodríguez asserts, "That Medina dominated the key elements of melodrama is obvious not only through the characters she created but also through the rhythm she imposed on the plot and her complete domain of theatrical techniques" (39).

²⁶ Hamblin acknowledged her role in the Bowery's success and, in his will, granted her an annuity "in consideration of the great advantages derived by me from her dramatic works" (Rodríguez 29).

²⁷ One similarity is that Mullen notes the play's concern with hybrid characters and its attempt to do away with such hybridity, but his focus has much more to do with a transformation of the frontiersman type into one that he argues is presented as a more suitable representation of national character (embodied by Stackpole). My reading of the play, however, emphasizes the importance of gender to the play's characterizations, provides a careful consideration of Medina's spectacular effects, and reads much more into the contentious nature of its destabilizing identities and paradoxical resolutions through the lens of moral legibility.

²⁸ See McConachie for an interesting exploration of the apocalyptic melodramas (including those by Medina) played at the Bowery and their relation to working-class solidarity, male bonding rituals, and masculinist ideology (119-155). Also, see Eric Lott for a discussion of white male working class identity and blackface minstrelsy in which the Bowery figures prominently (67-91).

²⁹ Rebecca Jaroff explains that the play did not achieve the success of its predecessors for several possible reasons, including the fact that the Arch Street was not in good financial shape at the time of the production, and so it was underfunded. She also posits that the views of gender and racial equality expressed by the character of Pocahontas and voiced by a white actress may have been too challenging for audiences (488).

³⁰ In a note to her short story "The Marriage Vow," "Barnes reminds her readers that Osceola was captured under questionable circumstances when 'General Jessup invited Osceola and other chiefs to conference and detained them as hostages, acting upon an illustrious precedent,'" and as Jaroff explains, "This 'illustrious precedent' may refer to the way in which Pocahontas was tricked into captivity" (qtd. in Jaroff 497).

³¹ In fact, the current scholarship on the Pocahontas plays discussed in this chapter almost wholly fails to account for Native perspectives on this important history.

³² As Faery explains, the truth of Smith's account has been debated by historians who have suggested that Smith (perhaps intentionally, perhaps not) misunderstood the event and that it was actually an elaborate adoption ritual intended to establish Smith as kin to Powhatan and his people. Others, noting the similarity of Smith's account to widespread European folk tales of an adventurer who is saved by a king's daughter and marries her, suggest that it is mere fabrication (113). The first suggestion squares with the oral tradition of the Mattaponi who maintain that such rituals were a common practice amongst the Powhatan people for admitting nations into the Powhatan confederacy. They also stress that children were not permitted at such ceremonies, and since Pocahontas would have been a child at the time she would not have been present for the ceremony much less have participated in it (Custalow and Daniel 19-21).

³³ Strachey's *History of Travaile* actually acknowledges this fact as well (54).

³⁴ These two W. A. Brown plays are no longer extant. See Marvin McAllister for a thorough account of W. A. Brown's theatrical businesses and productions.

³⁵ Lott registers T.D. Rice, the famous minstrel performer, playing Uncle Tom in a production of the play at the Bowery in 1854 as indicative of the fact that "minstrelsy was spliced to melodramatic performance" (218). In a chapter entitled "Uncle Tomitudes," Lott details the ways in which minstrelsy was incorporated into slavery melodramas, noting that Stephen Foster, the composer of dozens of the most popular sentimentalized minstrel songs was directly influenced by Stowe's novel and that Topsy was often lampooned as a feminized "Jim Crow" on stage. He asserts that, with its various versions, "Uncle Tom's Cabin onstage was the site of competing attempts to capture the authority of blackface," turning vying "racial discourses" into "sectional cultural dominants" in the years prior to the Civil War (227-228). As Hartman describes, "Blackness was a masquerade in melodrama no less than in minstrelsy. . . . Like the mask of blackness on the minstrel stage, melodrama's black mask was ambivalent and contradictory. . . . On stage, Topsy was as great an attraction as Tom. As much as the audience enjoyed scenes offering innocence, terrifying villainy, and the triumph of virtue, they enjoyed the bawdy and outrageous acts of minstrelsy no less" (28). Williams also notes that in the popular "Tom shows" melodramatized abolitionist sentiment confronted the white supremacy of minstrelsy (65). After tracing the relationship between Foster's sentimentalized minstrel songs and melodramatic representations of race, Williams concludes, "The white bodies performing blackness in Uncle Tom were thus inevitably marked by minstrelsy. Yet it may very well be that it was only through the marks of minstrelsy that the virtuous suffering of the black body could become visible in the first place to white audiences" (83).

³⁶ Roediger's and Lott's studies of minstrelsy examine in great depth the ways in which the minstrel show both reflected and helped to create white, male, working-class identities. Roediger comments on fraught emotions of hatred and longing underpinning the white supremacist thought of the working class as depicted in minstrelsy, while Lott details the ways in which blackface both reinforced and disrupted conceptions of race through its ambivalent gestures of repulsion, envy, and sympathy towards the black body. Cockrell's thorough descriptions of blackface performances point to their variable representations of race, particularly as the form shifted from one of subversive, subcultural status to one of conservative middle-class respectability by the late 1850s. In what is probably the most positive reading of blackface, Lhamon sees minstrelsy as a "complexly contested field" that underscored the divisiveness of racial politics and the performative nature of black and white racial identities (74). D. A. Brooks contends that minstrelsy defamiliarizes racial categories and depicts black bodies "at the center of both hegemonic and resistant social and cultural ideologies" (29).

³⁷ My analysis focuses primarily on the original American version, which as the title page indicates was "printed, not published," and tentatively dates back to 1860 or 1861.

³⁸ See Hartman, D. A. Brooks, Meer, and Rebhorn for extensive analyses of Zoe's "tragic mulatta" status and sympathetic identification.

³⁹ In fact, Zoe's disturbing hybridity is typical of the plot conventions Peter Brooks pinpoints in his foundational study of melodrama, where virtue is initially misrecognized, "its identity thrown into question," until the recognition of innocence occurs in the play's climax and resolution (30).

⁴⁰ See Jason Stupp for a full analysis of ritualized performance in slave auctions, including the "mock" auctions staged by Beecher.

⁴¹ See the *Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave* for an important historical description of such practices (26-35). While hired out to a slave trader by his master, Brown was forced to oversee the preparation of slaves for market by coloring their gray hairs black and setting them to dancing and playing cards.

⁴² Lott provides an insightful analysis of the homoerotic desire reflected in the black male sexuality routinely obsessed over in the minstrel show, and also points out that such illicit feelings/behaviors were controlled through the racist devaluation of blackness inherent to minstrel representations (124-126).

⁴³ The sensationalized scene of the slave's whipping had already been established as a conventional means of assigning virtuous innocence and debased villainy in slavery melodrama, as evidenced by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Williams 50-57). McClosky's attempt

to whip Paul is also an attempt to “violently rewrite the language of the African body—figuratively and literally—by branding and superimposing [his] own marks” onto it, which was so often the purpose of violent mutilations to the slave’s flesh, according to Henderson (34).

⁴⁴ In her lengthy study of racial melodrama, Williams illustrates how often melodramas stage trial-like scenes that position the audience as the jury and how often court trials involving African-American individuals, such as Rodney King and O.J. Simpson, have unfolded according to melodramatic logic.

⁴⁵ Given that M’Closky and Wahnotee come to fatal blows, it also a shrewd move on Boucicault’s part to use the Indian as a white surrogate rather than having an actual white character (normally this would be the melodramatic hero, George) kill the villain. With the Civil War looming, such violence performed by a Southerner against a Northerner, even between fictionalized characters, would surely have been distasteful, if not downright explosive.

⁴⁶ William Alexander Brown (no relation) became the first African American playwright when he penned *The Drama of King Shotaway* about the 1795 slave insurrection in the West Indies. The text is no longer extant and was never published, but it was performed at W. A. Brown’s African Grove Theater, the first African American theater company.

⁴⁷ As Keith M. Botelho also notes, Brown’s performances place “him in line with the black actors, particularly James Hewlett, the first African-American Shakespearean actor, as well as Ira Aldridge, S. Morgan Smith, and Paul Molyneaux, who were regularly performing in Britain and America in the first half of the nineteenth century” (196).

⁴⁸ Sampey’s story of being misrecognized as the white son of his owner is one that Brown retold in various works throughout his career. He claimed that the story was based on his own personal experience. As Ernest explains, “Indeed, throughout his career as a public figure, Brown would emphasize his mixed-race status, both to emphasize the sexual and familial violations that were common under slavery and to question the stability of the color line that limited Brown’s rights and activities as an American” (“Introduction” xxiv).

⁴⁹ Asserting that the play deploys a strategy of “multiply contingent identity,” Ernest writes, “The dramatic mode enables Brown to emphasize . . . the extent to which identity is a performance on the cultural stage. . . . One’s social identity, accordingly, is always contingent and is always in danger of being undermined as one’s performance awaits verifying responses in the form of reciprocal performances in the field of social relations, responses that may well contradict one another” (“Reconstruction of Whiteness” 1110-1111). Gilmore explains that in *Clotel* Brown “foregrounds the performative nature of race and gender in both abolitionism and minstrelsy, thus creating a space from which to

articulate a black male literary voice” (44), a reading that he notes applies to the author’s drama as well. Elam says that *The Escape* relies on “the ‘productive ambivalence’ of the black performer to deconstruct existing racial definitions. In the process, [Brown] comment[s] on how blackness is conceived and performed both on stage and in life” (288). Commenting on Brown’s *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People* (1880), Sinche observes, “By masking both himself and his characters, and by toying with ideas of blackness and whiteness, Brown imagines racial identity as a performance, a tool to be manipulated and utilized within the economy of entertainment” (84).

⁵⁰ Ernest analyzes Mr. White’s character to a great extent, ultimately stating, “To realize the identity claimed in professions of sympathy for the enslaved, Brown suggests, white northerners had to . . . question the terms and responsibilities of their own performances as white northerners claiming for themselves the moral authority of the antislavery cause” (“The Reconstruction of Whiteness” 1110). Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch read Mr. White in a more positive light as a character “who acts fearlessly in behalf of the escaping slaves, probably a reflection of William Brown’s faith in the courage and conviction of his abolitionist friends, such as Wells Brown [from whom the author took his name], William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips” (40).

⁵¹ Jean Fagan Yellin identifies the black male characters in *Clotel* as tricksters (160), while Ernest writes, “*The Escape*, for all its apparent simplicity, is an example of the kind of writing that has earned Brown a reputation among recent scholars as a trickster narrator, someone who understands how to play upon his audience’s assumptions when faced with an imbalance of power” (“Introduction” xxxi). Gilmore says that the black-faced characters in *Clotel* can be read in the tradition of “signifying” as it is described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (185). To demonstrate the process of “signifying,” Gates references the interactions found in the African American folk tradition between the trickster Monkey and his oppressor, the Lion. The latter is dominant, yet the Monkey is able to outwit him through his use of figurative language. In changing the meaning of the dominant discourse, the Monkey dismantles power relations and so tricks the Lion.

⁵² Gilmore (191) and Ernest (“Introduction” xxxv) note this scene’s similarity to “The Quack Doctor.” The original sketch by John W. Smith is collected in Gary D. Engle, ed., *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1978) and features a “black dandy” who pulls teeth, mixes medicines incorrectly, and womanizes—all of which Cato does as well. “The Quack Doctor” is one of dozens of minstrel sketches showing black-faced characters incompetently mimicking whites as doctors, lawyers, politicians, etc. Other minstrel sketches featuring medical frauds include *Pompey’s Patients; or, The Lunatic Asylum* (1872), *The Sham Doctor* (ca. 1870), *The Black Chemist* (1862), and *Laughing Gas* (1858). William J. Mahar posits that the “sheer quantity of sketches about medical charlatans suggests strong public concern about the quality of medical care, though, like many other kinds of popular comedy, any financially successful routine was bound to be copied” (204). His point is well taken and

it is plausible that Brown incorporated a version of such a scene into his play, at least in part, to make money as he did say that this was one reason for his writing and performing drama: “People will pay to hear the Drama that would not give a cent in an anti-slavery meeting” (qtd. in Farrison 294).

⁵³ Cato’s characterization as a duplicitous slave who behaves obediently to his master, even to the point of subjecting others to his oppression, while secretly acting on his own behalf follows in the tradition of Bickerstaffe’s *The Padlock*, a comic opera featuring the black-faced slave, Mungo. The play was so well liked that it was staged on both sides of the Atlantic for decades and the character Mungo became a lasting figure in European and American popular culture. Although sympathy is extended to his character, the depiction of Mungo is racist (the name became a racial slur). By turning Mungo’s brand of duplicity into Cato’s “signifying” antics, Brown creates a much more complex and humanistic portrayal of black identity.

⁵⁴ As Gilmore says, “This moment epitomizes Brown’s performance of blackness—essentially a putting on of blackface—and is emblematic of how black abolitionists like Brown were necessarily engaged with blackface minstrelsy, the most popular entertainment form of the time” (38).

⁵⁵ Brown relates how his master forced his mother to change his name from William so that his master can name his own newborn son William instead. His mother then changes his name to Sandford. He considers this to be “one of the most cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights” (*Narrative* 54). Upon securing his freedom, the ex-slave reclaims his birth name and also takes the name of the Quaker, Wells Brown, who helped him on the road to freedom (*Narrative* 58-59).

⁵⁶ King also observes that it is with slave narratives (and she uses Brown’s as an example) that “a tradition emphasizing names and naming in African-American literature originates” (56).

⁵⁷ Botelho details Shakespeare’s influence on Brown’s drama and Melinda’s similarities to Ophelia: “Her alignment with Ophelia’s own plight allows Melinda to enter into a realm of oppressed women and makes her not a female slave but a part of a larger female community of suffering” (Botelho 201). As Brown passionately declared in an 1847 lecture before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, “A million of women are in Slavery, and as long as a single woman is in Slavery, every woman in the community should raise her voice against that sin, that crying evil that is degrading her sex” (“Lecture” 128).

⁵⁸ “Weeping is the agency of the recognition of virtue. . . . It is never a merely passive wallowing in powerless tears,” and tears “give moral authority to action,” says Williams (53, 32).

⁵⁹ Brown describes the time he spent working for the slave trader, also named Mr. Walker, in his slave narrative. He details traveling with the slaves down the Mississippi River, how they were kept and prepared for auction in several market locations, the brutal violence against the slaves he witnessed, the sundering of families, and the moral degradations that such experiences produced on his character (*Narrative* 25-35).

⁶⁰ No other critics comment on this slave auction scene, which is strange given the amount of attention real and fictional slave auctions have received in nineteenth-century American literary scholarship. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that Brown avoids the exaggerated pathos and sympathetic identification so typical of such scenes so that it may come across as underwhelming and thus ordinary, but the scene is important exactly for these reasons since this is what makes it a powerful response to the sensationalized excesses of the popular reenactments of auctions in vogue at the time.

⁶¹ To the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Brown stated, “I may try to represent to you Slavery as it is; another may follow and try to represent the condition of the Slave; we may all represent it as we think it is; and yet we shall all fail to represent the real condition of the Slave. . . . Slavery has never been represented; Slavery never can be represented” (“Lecture” 108). Gilmore notes that these comments “provide an early articulation of some of the difficulties Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak enunciates in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’” (186).

⁶² Gilmore connects W. W. Brown’s reliance on “mulatto exceptionalism” in his works to the problematic conception of black manhood in antislavery culture. Slavery deformed gender roles and rendered the black man submissive, dependent, passive and thus feminine. Yet, the black man needed to demonstrate his fit with Victorian gender roles to indicate his humanity, particularly the black abolitionist writer-lecturer who sought to appeal to white audiences. The problem is that once the black abolitionist demonstrated his manhood, achieving literacy and independence, he seemed to many whites to have left blackness behind. Gilmore suggest that this is why so much antislavery work, like Brown’s, focused on mixed-race characters, the implication being that those characters’ manly attributes came from their white identity. Ultimately, Brown had to work within the confines of these racial and gender configurations, although Gilmore also details the many ways in which Brown deconstructs those configurations (56-60).

⁶³ *Foulahs!* also features a duplicitous slave named Cato yet it has a more tragic tone. Barrymore’s Cato leads a murderous insurrection in the West Indies. Although his character is villainized after he is consumed by vengeance, he is also granted sympathy through the figure of Ora, his sister and the play’s heroine, who ultimately sides with her brother over her masters. The white slaveholding characters in *Foulahs!* are also villainized, even to a greater extent than Cato. See Lawson (31-33) for more details on this no longer extant play. As discussed in Chapter Three, W. A. Brown’s *King Shotaway*

is about the slave insurrection of Black Caribs (descendants of Carib Indians and African Maroon slaves) on St. Vincent, and his adaptation of *Obi* is about the slave uprising in Jamaica led by the Maroon folk hero Jack Mansong. The W. A. Brown plays are not extant. See McAllister for a detailed account of W. A. Brown and his theatrical enterprises.

⁶⁴ It is somewhat striking that a male author should detail the complicated power dynamics at play between Dr. Gaines and Mrs. Gaines as well as its effects on Melinda and on the Gaineses themselves. The situation is comparable to that later narrated by Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in which she writes of the torment that the pseudonymous Linda Brent experiences at the hands of her master's wife when he similarly tries to make her his sex slave (although there is no physical fight between the two). Linda also exerts her self-agency in choosing a white lover as an attempt to take control of her own body and thwart her master, Dr. Flint. Ernest compares Dr. Gaines to Dr. Flint: "Both doctors are determined to possess not only the bodies but also the wills of the enslaved women under their power" ("Reconstruction of Whiteness" 1112), but he does not mention the correspondence between the white mistresses in both works. Ernest also claims that it is Glen who "undermines the implicit cultural script by which Dr. Gaines might have justified . . . his lecherous intent" by "making of that woman, Melinda, a wife" ("Reconstruction of Whiteness" 1113). He does *not* mention Melinda's self-assertion or rebellion.

⁶⁵ Of course, this tactic was not a new one, as many black abolitionists stressed the ideal of individualism in their antislavery work. The most commented upon is the extent to which Frederick Douglass depicts himself as a self-reliant individual in his slave narrative.

⁶⁶ For Child's writings on New York City performance culture, see her *Letters from New-York: Second Series* and especially "Letter 19" from 12 May 1844 (mistitled as XVIII). For references on Child attending the theater, see Carolyn L. Karcher (298, 687, 693). As far as actors go, Child's support of the famous Jeannie Barrett is most notable (Karcher 329).

⁶⁷ Child's appreciation of melodramatic opera is evidenced by her telling of how she went to see *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) several times (*Selected Letters* 238). Child saw a portion of the Astor Place Riot when she went to say goodbye to her friend Marianne Silsbee at the New York Hotel. The riot mob had followed Macready there after he fled the Astor Opera House. Child disliked the "ruffianly Forrest" whom she accused of inciting class warfare, though she sympathized with the lower class New Yorkers involved in the riot (*Selected Letters* 246).

⁶⁸ See Black's "Child's Play: Lydia Maria Child, Closet Drama, and the Limits of Representation," a presentation from the Philadelphia conference of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers (4-8 Nov. 2015).

⁶⁹ In addition to working their story into *The Stars and Stripes*, Child featured the Crafts in her *Freedmen's Book* (1865), an educational reader for emancipated slaves that featured African American leaders, thinkers, and artists. She later supported the Crafts's efforts to establish an industrial school and labor colony in Georgia (Karcher 539).

⁷⁰ For example, "Box" Brown and James "Boxer" Brown, or J.C.A. Smith (the free black man who boxed Brown up and shipped him out of Virginia both in actuality and in stage re-enactments), set Stephen Foster's "Uncle Ned," a minstrel song lamenting the passing of a faithful slave who lays down his labors in death, to new words that narrate how Brown lays down his labors, steps in the box, and comes out a free man (D. A. Brooks 118-119).

⁷¹ In his study of abolition's public sphere, Robert Fanuzzi explains that the anachronistic use of revolutionary history presented the abolitionist movement as "discordant with its own time...so that successive visions of the American republic could be brought to bear on one another" (xvii-xviii).

⁷² In this work, Child asks readers to imagine what foreigners might think when they witness a scene like the following: "A troop of slaves once passed through Washington on the fourth of July, while drums were beating, and standards flying. One of the captive negroes raised his hand, loaded with irons, and waving it toward the starry flag, sung with a smile of bitter irony, 'Hail Columbia! happy land!'" (33).

⁷³ I borrow these phrases from Henderson, who is describing not this play, but the condition of the African American body in slavery as a physical text whose disfigurement was made to represent the power dynamics of the institution. She also speaks to the potential of the reclaimed slave body to offer new conceptualizations of national identity and selfhood (35-45).

⁷⁴ It is worth remembering that the play was published in an anti-slavery gift book (the exchange of such books was itself a ritual) and sold at the annual fair of the American Anti-Slavery Society, a ritualistic holiday celebration. In addition, the practice of former slaves exhibiting their scarred and branded bodies at abolitionist meetings was also a common ritual (Henderson 42).

⁷⁵ In explaining the relationship between theater and ritual, Schechner maintains the following: "Efficacy and entertainment are not so much opposed to each other; rather they form the poles of a continuum. . . . If the performance's purpose is to effect

transformations—to be efficacious then the other qualities listed under the heading “efficacy” will most probably also be present, and the performance is a ritual” (79-80).

⁷⁶ The scene exemplifies Roach’s conception of “surrogation,” the process of ritualized substitution that occurs as “actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric,” and which I also discuss in my Introduction (2).

⁷⁷ Hartman’s representative example of such primary scenes is Frederick Douglass’s featuring the beating of his Aunt Hester in the opening to his slave narrative.

⁷⁸ As mentioned earlier, Peter Brooks defines the moral occult as “the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth” in an increasingly secular society (5).

⁷⁹ One of the most popular political songs of the era, “Adams and Liberty” was written by Robert Treat Paine in 1798 and was set to the tune of the well-known English drinking song “To Anacreon in Heaven” (the music was later used for the “The Star-Spangled Banner”). Joseph Hopkinson wrote the lyrics to “Hail Columbia!” in 1798 and set it to the tune of “The President’s March” (composed by Philip Phile as George Washington’s inaugural march). The song was part of an effort to unify the nation and thus avert war with France.

⁸⁰ I have researched all of the songs that appear in Child’s play in order to indicate for the first time which ones may have been her own original creations and also to show how much Child’s artistic sensibilities were influenced by music’s popular forms, which are indispensable to melodrama.

⁸¹ Child remarks on the excessive bravado of such New York melodramas: “[This] vaunting drama, and boastful song . . . works up the patriotism of the audience, till they feel a comfortable assurance that every American can ‘whip his weight in wild cats.’ . . . I speak playfully, yet the low, unsatisfactory, and demoralizing character of popular amusements is painful to me” (*Letters from New-York: Second Series* 174).

⁸² In his study of the minstrel tradition, Lott says of this song, “I am not one of those critics who see in a majority of minstrel songs an unalloyed self-criticism by whites under cover of blackface. . . . Nevertheless, it is hard to resist seeing this invocation of the Haitian Republic . . . as anything but a kind of ineffectually controlled historical anxiety. . . . This is one of the frankest early minstrel tunes about the weight of slavery, more a reminder than a denial of the black male body in the economy” (123-124).

⁸³ For example, the Negro Act of 1740 in Charleston outlawed such musical practices following the Stono rebellion in which dozens of black slaves marched to the beat of

drums and the call of horns as they killed whites, attacked warehouses, and burned fields, finishing with a celebration of song and dance (Dillon 136-137).

⁸⁴ Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels first performed this song but the original date is unknown.

⁸⁵ "Ole Dan Tucker" was popularized in 1843 by Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels and was one of the most often-performed minstrel songs of the period. Dan Emmett is often credited as the songwriter.

⁸⁶ The chorus of the Hutchinson's version is as follows: "Get out of the way! Every Station! / Freedom's car, Emancipation!"

⁸⁷ This 1843 song is also credited to Dan Emmett.

⁸⁸ It is somewhat strange that Child never actually stages a scene of Ellen's passing for a white male. There are scenes with her and William in the wilderness in which she is presumably disguised, but there are no scenes in which she interacts with another character and convinces them of her false identity. This is in striking contrast to the actual Ellen Craft who did have to perform as a white male in public in order to reach the North.

⁸⁹ The term "amalgamationist" was often used disparagingly to describe white and black abolitionists, a xenophobic taunt pointing to fears and disgust over interracial mixing, both social and sexual. For instance, a northern white truckmen says to Mr. Freeman, "Damned set of amalgamationists! No doubt they're hob-nob with all the *fust* niggers" (1.7). That Child would endorse so-called "amalgamationist" behavior is not surprising, for she was an advocate of interracial marriage throughout her lifetime as she envisioned this as the path to a future egalitarian America.

⁹⁰ This poem was published in *The North Star: The Poetry of Freedom, by Her Friends* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1840) and was presumably later set to music. Here is a sampling of the lyrics: "Why looks an anxious world on thee [i.e. the South], / In sorrow for thy destiny? . . . It is that when the joyous sea / Bore from West Indian Isles the song / Of earth's most glorious jubilee, / Of right, triumphant over wrong— / Midst a *world's* welcome, thou alone / Answered the tiding with a groan."

⁹¹ James Montgomery wrote this song, which is an adaptation of Thomas Moore's 1816 "Sound the Loud Timbrel" (about the freeing of Egypt's slaves in Exodus). It was published in *The Bow in the Cloud; Or, The Negro's Memorial* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1834). The chorus sung by the abolitionists in the play goes "Blow ye trumpet abroad o'er the sea! / Britannia hath triumphed, the negro is free!"

⁹² It is quite possible that these truckmen characters are based on the hugely popular melodramatic character, Mose the Fireman, so popular with working class audiences at theaters like the Bowery in New York City. The truckmen in Child's play are rowdy and vicious, always "ready for a mob" (1.7), perhaps not unlike the theatergoers who so liked Mose and who often rioted themselves.

⁹³ As Child mentions in a footnote, this scene is based on an actual event that occurred and the ferryman was reported to have said words such as these. W. M. Mitchell quotes a report on this event from the *Detroit Christian Herald*, which corroborates Child's claim, in his 1860 *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (112). The denouement is also quite similar to that crafted by Brown in *The Escape*.

⁹⁴ Henry Clay is the senator who introduced the series of resolutions to the US legislature that became the Compromise of 1850.

⁹⁵ The fact that the play makes use of popular minstrel lyrics and melodies furthers my sense that the play may have been designed for amateur performances in the home. This version of blackface had already entered middle-class American parlours through the sale of songbooks. As Lott notes, Stephen Foster alone sold over two hundred pieces of music per year in the 1850s (176). Fears of miscegenation accompanied the popular phenomenon as patriarchs worried over their white daughters singing such songs. Child embraces this kind of racial mixing with her use of the minstrel tradition in the play.

⁹⁶ As Lott, Ernest, and Roach demonstrate, antislavery performances did, at times, make use of blackface and demonstrated complicity with minstrelsy's racism. Explaining the coinciding rise of minstrelsy and abolitionism, Lott asserts that the former "existed happily alongside antislavery politics given its own ambivalences about race and slavery," and he cites the Hutchinson Family Singers as engaging in minstrelized antislavery performances (209, 197). Ernest says, "A subject for further examination is the connection between the minstrel shows and the staging of many antislavery events" (xxxix). See my earlier analysis of slave auctions and *The Octoroon* (Chapter Four) for commentary on Roach's suggested connections between antislavery demonstrations and minstrelsy.

Whether or not Child envisioned the use of blackface with her play is unknown given that it was never performed on stage. That her depiction of Jim relies on the racist stereotypes of minstrelsy is obvious and undeniable, even given her substantial efforts to humanize his character.

⁹⁷ It is significant that minstrelsy, in fact, claimed to be a culturally mixed form as its originators (such as T.D. Rice) said that they took their songs and dances directly from black slaves on southern plantations. While this is erroneous, some Americans lauded what they saw as the introduction of black cultural forms into the American mainstream

(Lott 16-18). This view we, of course, now recognize as wrong but perhaps Child was swayed by it.

⁹⁸ Citations are taken from *Hamilton: The Revolution* (2016), a full libretto of Miranda's musical containing annotations by the playwright himself as well as introductory chapters that provide background on its creation and production by Jeremy McCarter.

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