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White Trash Fetish: Representations of Poor White Southern Women and Constructions of Class, Gender, Race and Region, 1920-1941

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by

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White Trash Fetish: Representations of Poor White Southern Women and Constructions of Class, Gender, Race and Region, 1920-1941

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This dissertation analyzes depictions of poor white southern women produced by plays from 1920-1941 and the cultural context of their production through the lens of feminism and cultural studies. Emphasizing the importance of live performance in constructing, addressing, and challenging popular culture representations, this analysis builds on the work of feminist and cultural theorists, in addition to theatre historians who have researched this period, connecting these plays in new ways as cultural trends of gender, class, region, and race representation. The plays covered here include the Broadway hit *Tobacco Road*; the Group Theatre's *The House of Connelly* (1931);

Peggy (1922) and *Fixin's* (1924), plays from the Carolina Playmakers, an organization that encouraged community-based productions reflecting the experiences of both playwright and audience. The representation of southern white poverty varies in these plays, but all reveal complicated images of women, whiteness, economics, and region.

Defining white trash is complicated. If the term was simply a reflection of economic or racial status it would be interchangeable with "poor white," but white trash also references cultural stereotypes of laziness, degeneracy, lewdness, and criminal behavior. Nationally acclaimed productions using these stereotypes as "authentic" representations of class and region, position the South as culturally backward, solidifying notions of regional and class-based prejudices. Images of poor white women in these plays, some more positive than others, repeatedly present the "white trash" woman as little more than bartered goods. I contend that the use of the "white trash" female character in these plays, as a fetishized object, permanently determines her popular culture image.

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Envisioning the White Trash Stage

> SAL: D'ye spose folks has forgot when you-all clared out, ninteen year ago, yo' sister Pen kerried a daddyless young 'un with her? What of it? Happens to plenty! Po' white trash hasn't no business with sech eyes as Pen Dury's were — eyes big an' trustin' as a baby calf's!
>
> —*Po' White Trash*, Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland

In 1903, Elizabeth McCracken traveled throughout the United States interviewing women from a variety of communities in an attempt to gain a comprehensive understanding of their lives and work. McCracken's interviews, along with statistical data she collected in each town she visited, resulted in the book, *The Women of America* (1904). As she gathered her information, McCracken learned that she gleaned a clearer sense of women's lives through conversation and observation than she did by studying public records of their achievements. The minutiae

of everyday objects became symbolic of a particular woman's entire world, as she says "A little white pearl button, from a baby's cloak, held more suggestions of the lives of women on remote Western ranches than were contained in all my laboriously acquired statistics" (ix). McCracken's ethnography traces the principles and accomplishments of women who excelled in medicine, education, civic affairs, the arts, and, most importantly to her, home-making. The bulk of McCracken's subjects are white, middle-class women, but she devotes a chapter, "The Mother in the Tenement Home," to the struggles of the working poor, and in every other chapter she takes time to consider specific problems facing women less fortunate than her primary interviewees.

McCracken's interest in southern poverty emerges in the chapter "American Women of Letters," where she addresses the lives of poor southern whites through Evelyn Greenleaf Sutherland's one-act play, *Po' White Trash*. Published in 1900, along with other one-acts, some in collaboration with community pageant drama advocate Percy MacKaye, it is uncertain whether *Po' White Trash* was ever performed. The play is subtitled "A Little-Known Phase of American Life," suggesting that the script only hints at

certain aspects of southern poverty. McCracken insists, however, that Sutherland's play is "less a study of that phase than it is the phase itself" (225). A southerner herself, McCracken elaborates on this statement by recounting a conversation with a woman in Georgia who had spent years working with people "of the class known as 'po' white trash'" (226). After McCracken and this woman read the play together, the woman proclaimed that it is not just true to life, "it *is* the life" (226). To these women, Sutherland's play eclipses the status of fiction, representing the "real" world of poor southern whites.

Po' White Trash centers on Suke Dury's desire to avenge her sister Pen, who had an illegitimate son, Drent, after being seduced and tricked by Judge Marston Page. Suke plans to force Page to recognize Drent as his son and provide him with financial support. If Page refuses, Suke intends to kill him. Sal, a friend of Suke's, tries to convince her to let go of her plan because, for poor white women, "daddyless young 'uns" are a normal part of life. In Sal's estimation, Pen Dury's mistake came from expecting a wealthy white man to treat her with the same respect he gives to wealthy white women.

Page had what he considered a “youthful folly” twenty years earlier, in which he tricked Pen into sleeping with him by paying a stranger fifty dollars to marry them. Pen, believing that the marriage was legitimate, conceived Drent as a result of their involvement. When she realized that Page had tricked her, she moved to another town, keeping her son’s birth a secret from his father. Yet Pen eventually discovered that the stranger was a traveling preacher, which made the marriage and the child legitimate. Pen never wanted revenge on Page, but she has recently died, and Suke can finally confront the man who mistreated her sister.

Suke attacks Page with the information that the marriage was in fact legal, hoping to provide Drent with financial stability as well as the possibility of future prospects, but the boy is struck by a copperhead snake and dies minutes after he and Page learn they are father and son. Page’s reaction to the news that Drent is his son is minor compared to how gravely he responds to the sight of a legal marriage certificate signed with his and Pen’s names. Page is not as upset about having a child with white trash

as he is to find out that it is his upper-class wife and child who are illegitimate.

Sutherland's focus on honor and shame in relation to class, whiteness, and gender in the South is indicative of the issues that define white trash. White trash is not just about being poor and white; it is also about a undermining the cultural status of white privilege. *Po' White Trash* is the first known play to explicitly refer to characters as "white trash," and it is telling that the play focuses so intently on the sexual mores of poor white women. The term itself emerged in 1830s in the extended form of poor white trash. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies its first usage as an American pejorative used by black slaves in reference to white field hands. While the term may have been coined by blacks, by the time Sutherland used it theatrically it was part of common American slang. Sutherland's focus on poor white women and the treatment of them as sexual objects is typical of plays in the early twentieth century that used poor whites as subject matter. Often the production of these plays contained elements of titillation usually absent from traditional theatres, as they depicted sexually available women in legitimate

venues. Such representations of the poor, white, southern female created one of the most unexamined racial stereotypes at work in American culture today — that of the white trash woman.

Theatrically, the white trash female stereotype consistently appears in early twentieth century plays focused on country life. At a time when rural populations were waning, these plays juxtapose women, sexuality, and nature with the destitute existence of sharecroppers. In this dissertation I focus on "tenant farm" plays written and performed from 1922-1941: Harold Williamson's *Peggy, a Tragedy of the Tenant Farmer* (1922); Paul and Erma Green's *Fixin's, a Tragedy of a Tenant-Farm Woman* (1924); Paul Green's *The House of Connelly* (1931); and Jack Kirkland's *Tobacco Road* (1933), an adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's novel of the same name. Of plays written in the early twentieth century that highlight poor white southern women, the tenant farm plays offer the clearest example of how these representations changed drastically over a relatively short period of time. By focusing on such a specific group, I am able to examine shifts in perceptions of class, race, gender, and region, concentrating on the economic and

cultural differences that influenced notions of white trash, using these plays as a starting point for a larger cultural inquiry.

I analyze these plays from a feminist lens, concentrating on the significance of poor southern white female characters between World War I and World War II, and the relationship of these characters to the American popular culture that surrounded them. I have chosen to look at plays written primarily by men because these playwrights, possessing cultural capital not available to female playwrights in this era, provide a clear sense of the dominant cultural ideology in regards to representations of class, gender, race, and region. These playwrights not only reflected mainstream perceptions of poor white rural women, but, because of their own gender status, were able to get these perceptions published and produced. I question how certain depictions of poor southern women circulated in theatrical performances that reflected popular culture stereotypes of white trash. My primary interest is in the theatrical construction of southern rural identity, cultural views of poor whites that affect the context of production, and differences among

poor white female characters in each play. Looking at these plays and the cultural context of their production through the lens of feminism and cultural studies, I re-imagine the link between poor white southern women and constructions of cultural history, framing ideas of race, gender, and class-based identity within theatrical reflections of both regional and national perceptions of white poverty.

Whiteness vs. White Trash

When I was growing up, there was one traffic light in Shepherdsville, Kentucky. Whether my family was leaving town, or coming home, we stopped at this intersection, and its landmarks and activities are permanently woven into my memory. On one corner, the florist, on the opposite corner a mechanic’s garage, opposite that a real estate office, and on the fourth corner a car wash. Every summer I saw men in white hoods standing at this intersection, handing out pamphlets to the passing cars. The Grand Dragon of the KKK lived in our county, and the organization was as at home in Shepherdsville as the high school band boosters.

My mother would hold the car’s steering wheel tightly, clench her teeth, and roll up her window, instructing my

sister and I to do the same, “Don’t look at them,” she said, “just stare straight ahead.” I learned to fear the KKK, partially because we were Catholic and therefore among their lesser targets, but mostly because I saw them as both evil and white. We shared skin color, which suggested that we could be aligned. Year after year the pamphlets were held out to our passing car – they did not know we were Catholic, just that we were white. How, I wondered, would people know that I was not one of them? This was the first time I became confused over what it meant to be white, and, years later, I am still asking the question.

Whiteness is not easily defined. It is most often described by what it is not: the surplus identity that remains after marginalized identities are categorized (Goldberg 9); neither race, nor color, but what is believed by whites to be the “normal” human state (Kaplan 321); constructed as individual through the pluralization of nonwhite identities (Chambers 190); a constructed race formed over time through social, economic, and political practices (Babb 2); a visible identity communicated through either “observation or by self-identification” (Schuman 71). All of these explanations are, in some ways, true, and

yet none of them fully conveys whiteness as a specific racial category.

Part of the difficulty in defining whiteness comes from the relative newness of the racial classification as it is used currently. Valerie Babb identifies whiteness and its manufacture as a combination of desires and needs, “to create a historical past, create a national identity, and to minimize class warfare” (16). The move from a very specific, national division in whiteness (English, Nordic), to notions of skin color identification has been widely documented.[1] Irish, Scottish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants, among others, did not become “white” until large numbers of them became middle-class. With this history of whiteness as a marker of class status, poor whites emerge as subset of whiteness, separate from the primary racial classification. This separation is critical to discussions of racial categories, because acknowledging economic and cultural distinctions within whiteness works to “de-stabilize and undermine any unified or essentialized notion of white identity as the primary locus of social privilege and power” (Newitz and Wray 169). If public

[1] See Babb, Dyer, Goldberg, Gabriel, Brodkin, Barrett, Roediger, Lipsitz

cultures of whiteness are dependent on generalized economic classifications (i.e., all whites are advantaged), then white trash culture and economic conditions must be treated as “different,” or outside of whiteness.

The maintenance of white privilege relies on this belief that to be white equals economic and social opportunity, a belief that cannot explain the vast numbers of poor whites in the U.S. Privilege then works as a reflection of economic control within a racial classification. I am not suggesting that the racial biases in this country are irrelevant or insignificant to the study of privilege. What I am asserting is the importance of economic difference within those studies, and, for the purposes of this project, within discourses of whiteness.

My use of “white trash” applies John Hartigan’s reading of racial categories as, partially, an expression of economic status. He outlines racial formations as “the result of historical movements of people and shifts in economic structures . . . [but] Race is not simply historically produced; it provides an interpretive basis for the recognition and manipulation of history itself” (*Racial Situations* 25). Hartigan suggests that whiteness,

like any other race, is much more than skin color. Understanding white trash as a racial formation separate from middle class whiteness, for instance, is a critical factor in considering how poor whites are staged and performed.

I use the term white trash not as a substitute for poor white but as a parallel. Although the characters in *Peggy* and *Fixin's* are considered poor whites, in *The House of Connelly* tenant farmers are referred to as poor whites and white trash alternately. In *Tobacco Road*, there is no confusion in either the play or response to it — the tenant farmers are white trash. The popularity of *Tobacco Road* established it as the culmination of tenant-farm plays, and it became representative of the genre.

I do not use the term "white trash" derisively; I use it to challenge its status as a referent of disposable white identity, and to question the class politics that surround it historically. White trash is part of but not recognized within white culture, marking it racially, but, as Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray have argued, it is "simultaneously marked as trash, as something that must be

discarded, expelled, and disposed of in order for whiteness to achieve and maintain social dominance" (169).

Therefore, the term white trash is not simply a reflection of economic or racial status; it also represents certain cultural markers, a "complex set of social representations, an amalgam of well-known stereotypes" (Newitz and Wray 171). The emergence of these markers coincides with national crises in economic and racial perceptions of whiteness, notably the Great Depression. Many negative white trash stereotypes appeared in Depression-era popular culture – theatrically, for example, through *Tobacco Road*. The other Depression-era play in this study, *The House of Connelly*, shows a mixture of both positive and negative traits in its poor white characters, and ultimately privileges those who work hardest as the most noble. The first two plays in my research, *Peggy* and *Fixin's*, were written before the Depression, and offer sympathetic views of poor white women.

Analysis of the cultural impact of white poverty began soon after Reconstruction ended. One of the most influential elements of popular culture bias came from the *Eugenic Family Studies*, conducted by various eugenics

researchers from 1877 through 1919. Published in legislative reports, popular magazines, research bulletins, and professional journals, the family studies generated support from both the general public and welfare workers for eugenics research and programs. Terms like degenerate, lazy, licentious, half-witted, criminal, and the all-encompassing white trash, circulated through American popular culture with the assurance of scientific fact; eugenics argued that if those afflicted with the “defective gene” were contained and kept from breeding, society would be cleansed from a great evil.

Although the family studies did not isolate a particular region as “infected” with white trash, the descriptions of these families correspond with mass-media portrayals of poor southerners in the early twentieth century. The eugenics movement inspired a number of social policy changes, based on the “scientific accuracy” of their findings. One eugenics project, for example, was the expansion of mental institutions which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, required little more than verification from social scientists of defective genes to house individuals for indefinite sentences. Female

patients, often believed to be indiscriminately promiscuous, were sterilized to prevent further “bad breeding” (Rafter 1).

Whether in social science journals or on stage, salacious and degrading representations create a dangerous stereotype. This stereotype can then be used to deflect responsibility for the continuing presence of multiple social problems, from racism to teenage pregnancy to violent crime. In *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies* (1988), Nicole Rafter suggests that the stereotyping that emerged from the family studies creates “a myth that creates a menace, the half-witted, Grendel-like stranger who likes to live in hollow logs and decrepit shanties” (29-30). The white trash myth has become so extreme and pervasive, and definitions of white trash are so varied, that almost anyone can either be identified as or disassociated from the stereotype, depending on which interpretation of the term is used.

Hartigan suggests that “the ‘white trash’ myth allows an insidious belief to stand: that it is only ‘those people’ who are racist; only those women who are so licentious; only those men who are that cruel and violent”

(“Unpopular Culture” 323). Hartigan’s argument highlights the widespread repercussions of cultural stereotyping, pointing to the ways that class differences divide the United States and interferes with attempts to understand and solve social problems. Although Hartigan focuses here on the white trash myth in general, I argue that this myth also allows white southerners in particular to shift the region’s history of violent racism to a white “other,” despite the fact that organized racism in the South has often been instigated by middle and upper-class whites.

Beyond the South, the white trash myth allows middle and upper-class whites throughout the United States to mask the ways that whites across all class strata have worked together against people of color. As historian Joel Williamson states, “the intermittent, sporadic, open violence of one complement[s] the steady, pervasive, quiet violence of the other” (294-5). The danger of the white trash myth is that it moves so smoothly in our cultural subconscious. Depression-era audiences could laugh at the characters in *Tobacco Road*, assured that, despite their

region’s own setbacks, the nation’s real problems were down South.[2]

By attributing social problems, such as racism, to a specific region, the South, or to a specific class, white trash, neither poverty nor racism is addressed on a productive level. bell hooks addresses these complications of class hierarchies and social change in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000). She points to the effects of stereotyped assumptions saying, “Better to have poor and working-class white folks believe white supremacy is still giving them a meaningful edge than to broadcast the reality that the poor of any race no longer have an edge in this society” (117). hooks argues that refusing to analyze and acknowledge white poverty dis-empowers all efforts to make a difference along lines of race, gender, and class.

Theatre, as a cultural practice, is inextricably linked to a culture’s securities and anxieties about representation and identity. By looking at the ways that popular live performance in the 1920s and 1930s addressed the issues emphasized by hooks and Hartigan, it is possible to see how stereotypes of white poverty coincided with

[2] The Northeast and Midwest experienced the highest rates of poverty and

increased anxiety about economic stability and white privilege. This concurrent development reveals the complex ways that whiteness has operated in American culture to disassociate the majority of whites from whites in poverty, therefore reinforcing the illusion that white culture is superior to the culture of other races.

I am not interested in a revisionist account of the Southern poor white that deflects attention from the violent history of white racism in that region. Nor do I suggest that white trash is positioned as a marginalized group treated worse or similar to African Americans in the South. What I am focused on is how the poor southern white was placed outside of whiteness for both economic and cultural reasons. In these plays, the potential for white middle-class assimilation, as pursued by key female characters, represents a kind of salvation – not so much for them or their families, but for *whiteness*.

Feminism, Culture, and Performance

In each of the plays studied in this dissertation, poor women are positioned as sexual objects, available,

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unemployment during the Depression (Kurtz 58).

whether they like it or not, to men of all classes. In *The House of Connelly* and *Tobacco Road* the sexuality of poor women is overt. Some female characters actively pursue physical relationships with men, others avoid sexual activity that is not connected to a committed relationship, and still others are desperate to escape sexual relationships of any kind. Regardless of these women's individual interests, they are treated primarily as sexual objects by the male characters. While there is no open sexual activity or conversation in *Peggy* and *Fixin's*, in both plays the female protagonist's goals are undermined by the assumption of her sexual promiscuity by other characters. In all four of these plays, notions of loose morality are directly connected to a woman's economic class.

The idea of female characters as sexual objects is by no means isolated to these plays, or to any play featuring poor women. More specifically, feminist performance theorist Jill Dolan argues that all representation is directed to the gaze of the male spectator, inviting him to "identify with the active male protagonist portrayed in the narrative through voyeuristic and fetishistic viewing

conventions” sharing in the satisfaction of that character to “fulfill his desire for the story’s passively situated female” (*Desire* 121-122). The plays I study here were all written by male playwrights, with the exception of *Fixin’s*, which was written by Paul Green in collaboration with his sister Erma Green. That they are written from the perspective of the male gaze is definite, but it is also clear that these playwrights, following the tone of the Progressive Era, intended to use these plays as a call to improve the lives of poor white southern women. That they are unable to separate these women from the position of passive sexual object speaks to Dolan’s argument about representation, and also to notions about women, morality, and class.

Representations of women considered white trash unmistakably resonate with Dolan’s analysis of women, performance, and the male gaze. She pushes her argument further, making a connection between theatrical and pornographic representation, saying that “Any representation can be seen as essentially pornographic, since the structure of gendered relationships through which it operates is based on granting men subjectivity while

denying it to women" (122). This subject/object relationship is more veiled in some representations than others, but in these tenant farm dramas it is not obscured by notions of respectability or moral commitments; poor women are unquestionably viewed as objects of sexual conquest. While specific sexual relationships make this representation evident in *The House of Connelly* and *Tobacco Road*, the subtle presence of women's sexuality is no less important in *Peggy* and *Fixin's*. In both plays the female protagonists assert their right to a better life than tenant farming allows, but other characters insist that their motivation is sexual. The need to harness and manipulate the sexuality of women underscores the action of the plays.

I consider these representations of women explicit, as they provide consistent images of women as sexual objects, but also because their presence as white trash provokes a distinct reading of female sexuality. My choice to use the word *explicit* draws on Rebecca Schneider's approach to feminist performance artists in *The Explicit Body in Performance.* Schneider defines the explicit body as one which, through performance, "aims to explicate bodies in

social relation," becoming a "site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege" (2). The ghosts that Schneider invokes are visible in any performance that addresses issues of class, gender, and/or race, making her work, though focused on contemporary avant-garde performance, useful in studying representations of white trash in theatre history.

Schneider's explanation of the explicit focuses on twentieth century feminist performance artists, such as Carolee Schneeman, Annie Sprinkle, and Karen Finley, who stage their performances on and through their bodies, sometimes blurring the lines between art and pornography. Schneider sees these performers as following four major themes: playing across the body the "historical drama of gender and race"; re-evaluating women's roles in seeing and being seen through art; challenging the positions of gender, race, and class in representation—specifically through commodity capitalism; and questioning accepted ideas about transgression in avant-garde art (3).

Schneider's analysis focuses on women who are able to shift the power structure of women's sexual representation in their own favor because of the control they have over the characters they create and perform.

Schneider argues that these performance artists challenge sacred social binaries operating in Western culture, naming specifically those of male/female, white/black, civilized/primitive, and art/porn. Citing the work of Vivian Patraka, she terms these challenges the "terror unleashed in the collapse of binary distinctions — or 'binary terror'" (13). Annie Sprinkle's performance art, which explicitly references her experience as a porn star, triggers a binary terror based on the combination of "art" and "porn." A similar terror results from the combination of "white" and "trash," which have worked historically as cultural binaries. Add the word "woman" and a third binary terror materializes, because of the fraught relationship that women of every race and class have had with notions of privilege and power.

Staged representations of women in the plays I study in this dissertation lack the social power of Schneider's performance artists, partially because they are drawn by

men who conform to certain stereotypical notions about poor women and sexuality which are reinforced through production. Additionally, while the artists that Schneider studies consciously and overtly address the four major themes outlined above, the female characters in the plays I analyze, written within the parameters of dominant gender ideology, do not seem aware of any cultural power that they may possess, coding the performance of those characters with a predetermined submission. Schneider's subjects, however, are clearly challenging middle-to upper-class standards of female behavior and respectability. Representations of poor white women always already challenge those standards through their status as white "other"; their explicit performance provokes the binary terror of "white," "trash," "women," and beyond challenging the status quo, they deface it.

White trash culture works as what Michael Taussig identifies as a public secret, the "important social knowledge,[of] knowing what not to know" (2). If whiteness represents privilege, then white trash cannot be overtly identified with dominant forms of whiteness. As public cultures of whiteness are dependent on generalized economic

classifications, so are public cultures of femininity. Representations of poor white women, brimming with suggestions of unrestrained sexuality, unveil two public secrets at once: first, that women possess sexual desires; and second that, historically, men of all classes have taken sexual advantage of poor women.

Taussig's analysis of the public secret relies on notions of defacement. He suggests that the public object, a statue for instance, may seem invisible until it is defaced – a community knows it exists but it rarely receives notice. Defacement, however, draws public attention to the statue, transforming it from "an excess of invisibility to an excess of visibility" (52). The performances of poor white women studied here were motivated by hopes for social reform; by highlighting the difficulties of poor white tenant farm women, the playwrights wished to inspire audiences to improve social conditions in the rural South. By putting the problems of poor white women onstage, they are made visible in venues and to audiences that otherwise may have no direct awareness of their struggles. These intentions were clouded by stereotyped concepts of class and gender, making their

“excess of visibility” a reinforcement of certain popular culture ideas.

If the explicitness of white trash representation carries “ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege” (Schneider 2), then it is impossible to escape popular culture stereotypes. It is possible though to view the performance of stereotypes as a critique of the mainstream, even as they reinforce mainstream prejudices, which rely on the stability of social binaries. Any stereotype that carries with it binary terror simultaneously questions what social practices those binaries privilege and which are denied.

A crucial element of class disprivilege in representations of poor white women is their relationship with notions of “good girl” status. The white trash female stereotype’s inability to copy, or disinterest in, good girl status can be compared to Kate Davy’s discussion of New York theatre collective the WOW Café and performances of white femininity.[3] The primarily white, middle class,

[3] WOW is an acronym for Women’s One World. The WOW Café was founded in 1980, and Davy’s article discusses their work from that date to her essay’s publication in 1995.

lesbian members of the WOW Café work to challenge, among other things, mainstream expectations of femininity. One aspect of performances presented at WOW Café, in Davy's analysis, is to undermine the term good girl, and its implications for both desexualizing women and relegating good girls to straight-middle-class-white culture at the same time (209). WOW Café's performers challenge the good girl image overtly, but poor white heroines challenge the image as well when they are constructed as essentially positive characters unable to meet expectations of "good girl" femininity. The construction of the white trash stereotype, like certain WOW Café performances, operates as "the antithesis of middle-class propriety as lodged in the image of the good girl" (Davy 208), working against ideas about acceptable performances of femininity, even when geared toward assimilation to the mainstream, because the white trash stereotype's presence is, in and of itself a critique.

While all stereotypical images may function as critiques of the stereotype, even if they reinforce popular culture perceptions, *performances* of stereotype produce a kind of critique that no other image can create—that of a

live person enacting representation for a live audience, making the stereotype to a certain extent “real.” Performance reproduces the object of white trash and critiques it, “gaining power in that very act of copying, only then to immolate the mimicry in a violent gesture of anti-mimicry, the defacement itself” (Taussig 44). Stage representations can additionally manipulate images of white trash by “naming actually existing white people who occupy the economic and social margins of American life, and . . . a set of myths and stereotypes that justify their continued marginalization” (Newitz and Wray 172), displaying, and sometimes undermining, mainstream perceptions of gender, class, and power.

History, Performance, Nation

It is impossible to separate histories of American theatre from constructions of nationalism, class, gender, and region, or from the role that each has played in the development of the other. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby begin their three-volume *Cambridge History of American Theatre* noting, “in one sense the history of theatre in America recapitulates the history of America

itself” (4), recognizing that neither stage performances nor the histories of them can be separated from their cultural and political contexts. The theatrical stage provides a space in which national issues are played out, either providing a forum for alternate views of these issues, or reinforcing the status quo. Theatre can be seen as a process which, “stages the private and public anxieties of a people who are what they are because of history” (Wilmeth and Bigsby xvi). While national “private and public anxieties” over race, region, class and gender certainly influence the writing of theatre history, they are rarely discussed openly in pre-World War II texts.

The history of American theatre in the early twentieth century is largely a history of exceptionalism—promoting the American nation as superior among nations, possessing a singular, unchallenged greatness. Scholars in this era often discuss theatrical productions and performers in terms of national characteristics, suggesting that performance and American progress are intrinsically linked. *A History of the Theatre in America* (1919), by Arthur Hornblow, provides in the preface an image of extraordinary Americans, “courageous thespians pressing their way through

the still virgin forests, braving the perils of the great American desert” (9). Several of the theatre artists discussed by Oral Sumner Coad and Edwin Mims Jr. in *The American Stage* (1929) also fit an exceptionalist narrative, particularly their mention of Mercy Warren’s *The Adulateur* as “a glowing prophecy of the future glories of America" (23). Arthur Hobson Quinn, in *A History of the American Drama* (1946), suggests that the drama of the Revolution revealed a great deal about the American spirit, exhibiting “the expression of one great quality, that of courage” (50), and even when Americans in these plays show defeats they “reveal the triumph of character” (53).

This link between national identity and theatrical practices appears as late as the 1980s. Garff B. Wilson’s *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre* (1982) insists that the history of theatre is intrinsically tied to the development of the nation (1), and both are imbued with a patriotic heroism and morality (30). Wilson compares the American theatre to a “fabulous phoenix,” that possesses a “tenacity and a vitality that are phenomenal” (322). These histories often focus on obstacles overcome by

theatre artists through perseverance, and who emerge as heroes and heroines, ensuring a uniquely American culture.

How do stage performances of unseemly Americans and troubled American regions enter history? In *The National Stage* (1992), Loren Kruger maintains:

> . . . theatrical nationhood in the era of mass politics foregrounds the representation of national citizenship as national spectatorship, however, it tends to consign to the wings or the shadowy realms outside the theatre those practices that challenge the hegemonic paradigm of national theatre. (186)

Here Kruger focuses on the question of theatre as a symbol of national unity, critiquing the gaps inherent in such a broad representation. Performances that are recognized in theatre histories typically stand out to scholars because of their unique content, virtuosity of performers, or affiliation with significant theatrical organizations. In recent years, however, historians have become interested in theatrical performances that have been "consigned to the wings or shadowy realms," acknowledging the impact that performers or plays have had on their communities,

regardless of whether they have been recognized in major theatrical movements.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, images of the rural South showed a region that was “brutal and backward, un-American,” and many twentieth century popular culture representations of the South reinforced those stereotypes (Kirby 1). While conflicting notions of class, region, race, and gender hierarchies call into question the usefulness and possibility of a monolithic national image, southern white poverty confuses ideas of national identity further, by combining class, race, and region in a way that insists on a rethinking of how these categories exist in American culture. The ways that class can shape racial identity positions poor whites outside of “whiteness,” conflicting with static images of race that appear in the media and popular culture (Hartigan, *Racial* 8). These complications are evident in theatre about and in the South between World War I and World War II.

Between 1920 and 1941 the topics of whiteness, poverty, and the South held many theatre-goers’ attention. Plays wrestling with the leftover demons of the Civil War ranged from the community drama plays of the Carolina

Playmakers to Broadway hits like Dorothy and Dubose Heyward's *Porgy and Bess* (1925),[4] Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926),[5] and Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures* (1929). Americans, trying to solidify what it meant to be a good citizen of the nation, had to reconcile the unrest of the Civil War with the unity required by World War I and the Great Depression. In the South, these questions reverberated against complicated images of whiteness, economics, and region. Attempts to answer these questions through live performance revealed confusion over race and class in the South.

I focus on the years 1920-1941 because of the sudden appearance of poor white southern women in plays of this era, and their equally sudden disappearance after World War II. Historically, my study begins at the close of the Civil War in 1865, with the struggles for national identity that began at that time. Reconstruction ended in 1877, after twelve years of "restoring" the Confederate states to the cause of national unity. Popular thought held the hope that an era of domestic trauma was over, and the nation was

[4] *Porgy and Bess* was made into the musical *Porgy* in 1935 through collaboration between the Heywards and George and Ira Gershwin.
[5] Green won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927 for *In Abraham's Bosom*.

moving slowly toward regional unification. During this fifty-five year period, national stereotypes of the poor southern white become entrenched in popular culture, strongly influencing the plays I study here.

World War I provided an opportunity for the country to come together to fight an international struggle. The Great Depression, though its impact and timing varied from region to region, was largely a non-regional domestic struggle that, for a time, altered strict class divisions. The period covered by my dissertation ends with 1941 because the beginning of World War II represents a distinctly different era in American nationalism, and officially marks the end of the Depression. Between Reconstruction and World War II America was a nation in conflict over immigration, women's rights, white supremacy, and Native Americans, a nation trying to forget the Civil War and trying to establish an international image. If the ideal American, as Hornblow, Quinn, and Wilson suggested, is "clean and healthy," "courageous," and full of "tenacity and a vitality," then white trash — termed "lazy," "degenerate," "half-witted," and "criminal" — falls short of the mark. In

the South, the folk drama movement aimed to challenge negative perceptions of rural southerners.

The first plays that I look at in this dissertation, *Peggy* and *Fixin's,* are products of the Progressive movement's focus on higher education and community uplift. Progressivism's rise in the 1890s was largely fueled by concerns such as better educational conditions, protection of women and children, improved democracy, and the recovery of urban conditions, with a specific focus on class discord (Bolt 182). These issues were of great concern to women, and they had been pushing them publicly since the Civil War. The complexity of Progressivism in regards to gender lies in its position as a political movement. Although the movement gave women certain opportunities and a voice in public issues, they still lacked the ability to directly make changes, specifically through voting. Although World War I diffused the energy of the Progressive movement, its policies continued to affect educational reforms in the South through the 1930s.

Judith Stephens' essay, "Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920," argues that plays of the Progressive era are especially suited to

feminist analysis, because of the focus on “issues that grew out of contemporary social movements dedicated to changing women’s position in society,” but that the dramatic conventions of the period “served the processes of compensation and recuperation and thereby reproduced dominant gender ideology” (283). To a large extent this is true of the plays I discuss here; while female characters often appear strong in these texts, struggling against gender restrictions, ultimately these women must either give in to the authority of patriarchal figures, or face precarious futures.

Written by student members of the Carolina Playmakers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC Chapel Hill), *Peggy* and *Fixin’s* present positive representations of poor white southern tenant farm women. In these plays, women are not treated as white trash so much as they are seen as white people without money. There is nothing that indicates that, with a change in financial stature, these female protagonists could not fit into white middle class culture. Tenant farmers were a natural source of plot and character for these students, as many of them grew up in the rural agricultural communities of North

Carolina. By 1910, tenant farmers comprised half of all farmers in the South, and by 1930, although white-operated farms grew from 1.9 million to 2.3 million, the number of white farm owners did not change (Jones 82-83). These statistics suggest that as the land owners increased their acreage, the number of tenant farmers working in the South increased accordingly. For the majority of students attending UNC Chapel Hill in the 1920s, tenant farmers would have comprised a considerable portion of the population in their home communities.

Frederick Koch, founder and director of the Carolina Playmakers (1918-1941), a theatre group connected to UNC Chapel Hill, had previously started the Dakota Playmakers at the University of North Dakota. Koch's work with both the Dakota and Carolina Playmakers focused on "pioneering for an American people's theatre" (Selden "Frederick Henry Koch" 2). Koch relied on the work and creativity of his students, requiring them to assess divisions in their own communities, basing their plays on personal experience. Specifically, Koch's students wrote folk drama, which he defined as plays concerned with "man's conflict with the forces of nature and his simple pleasure in being alive.

The term ‘folk’ with us applies to that form of drama which is earth-rooted in the life of our common humanity” (*Carolina* 1941, xiv). Through the genre of folk drama, the Playmakers hoped to connect audiences throughout the South with representations of a “common humanity” that would culturally unite a region.

The Playmakers’ timing was critical to their success. The troupe emerged after World War I, a time when defining the nation was becoming crucial. Anxieties about immigration, in particular, sparked a desire to outline the nation’s identity. Americans looked away from the urban centers where most immigrants settled, and toward the rural, in an attempt to classify the moral and cultural foundations of U.S. culture. S.E. Wilmer asserts that the rural is often used as a “source of authenticity, finding in the ‘folk’ the attitudes, beliefs, customs, and language to create a sense of national unity” (11). Folk drama, then, may surpass the local, emerging as a sign of national identity.

The idea of folk drama or folk identity was not exclusive to writers in the South during the 1920s and 1930s. Several writers associated with the Harlem

Renaissance created “folk” characters, always rural, southern, and poor, that often were intended to represent an “authentic blackness.”[6] Although the use of a metaphorical “folk” in fiction of the Harlem Renaissance may have been influenced by the migration of southern blacks to the urban North, the writers who incorporated folk characters were not necessarily from the rural South themselves. Hazel Carby argues that intellectuals like Zora Neale Hurston “represented ‘the people’ through a reconstruction of ‘the folk’ and avoided the class confrontation of the Northern cities” (166). By grounding a play’s characters as “folk,” a writer is able to dodge complex social issues as the “folk” are emerging from utopic notions of community and identification.

While the Playmakers’ use of folk drama undoubtedly helped alleviate class tensions between the touring college students and rural audience members, the majority of the students were from rural, often farming, backgrounds themselves. This is not to imply that the Playmakers avoided marketing stereotypical portrayals as “authentic” representations. The social and economic class of the

[6] See Favor, Carby, Nicholls, and Krasner.

students, however, was complex enough to argue that, in some cases, their plays were drawn from lived experience. It is unlikely, however, that any of the UNC Chapel Hill students had been tenant farmers, suggesting an attempt in the tenant farm plays to create an “authentic” but unreal rural white southerner.

The development of folk drama in the South is crucial to its acceptance on a national scale. David Whisnant argues in *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (1983) that, although northeastern intellectual and cultural centers resist the idea of “a South or an Appalachia that could (and did) give birth to and nurture progressive and radical social movements and institutions,” in these same centers “it has long been accepted as established truth that the mountains and the rest of the South are laden with fascinating cultural traditions” (6). Whisnant uses American musical history as an example, contending that much of the music since World War II has been shaped by a mainstream fascination with southern music, musicians, and musical forms, believing that in the South, Americans can locate “rooted cultural energy and authenticity” (7).

The Playmakers' productions encouraged support and greater cultural appreciation within the southern region of the rural in general and of the rural South in particular. Additionally, the ability of the Playmakers to tour throughout North Carolina and other southern states connected the organization to larger regional and national movements, such as Progressivism, women's rights, and the good roads movement.[7] The Playmakers created performance strategies based on theatrical realism, emphasizing the simple, homemade nature of their plays, and deliberately making set, costume, and lighting choices to evoke images of rural culture.

A driving characteristic of folk culture, whether it is through festivals, music, storytelling, or theatrical performance is the audience's identification with the "folk" culture presented. Koch argued that folk drama

[7] The good roads movement believed that building good roads was a panacea for national problems, as well as for regional difficulties. Increasing the possibility of travel throughout rural communities would halt "the decline in rural values" and simultaneously allow farmers a way of coping "with the isolation and cultural backwardness inherent in their way of life" (Preston 16). Once travel increased to and from remote southern communities it was believed that "The county dweller would be uplifted and stimulated . . . and love of rural life would fill the nation" (Preston 16). This was also the goal of the Playmakers, and although Koch's agenda focused on live performance and not road construction, the development of better roads in the South made it possible for him to reach broader audiences.

appealed to a wide variety of audiences because of what he termed “universal” themes, the “pitiful conflict of two natures which are irreconcilable,” and which, presented in stark simplicity are easily recognizable (*Carolina* 1941, xvi). Robert Cantwell describes this notion of the “universal” nature of folk performance more specifically in *Ethnomimesis: Folklife and the Representation of Culture* (1993), saying that, although scholars are uncomfortable recognizing the “salient characteristics of folk performance: its immediacy, spontaneity, and ingenuousness, its ‘unself-consciousness,’” due to the implication of arrogance that such a recognition would suggest, “it is well within our more egalitarian outlook to acknowledge . . . the often astonishing technical, emotional, and intellectual power of the folk performance” (7). Cantwell’s description of the power of folk performance complements Koch’s belief in the universal appeal of the themes of folk drama. Both indicate that, beyond any fascination with “simple folk,” lies a deep-rooted emotional response to folk culture.

Questioning Texts

In the 1920s and 1930s, the United States was moving from a rural to an urban-based population. In 1890, two-thirds of all Americans lived in rural communities, but by 1930, only one-quarter of the U.S. population lived on farms (NY Public Library 235). The South, still primarily rural and agricultural, became increasingly “other” from the rest of the country, particularly the Northeastern industrial centers. This shift, and the resulting cultural differences between rural and urban life, was largely responsible for the state of North Carolina’s decision to focus efforts in its educational system on the advancement of rural southern schools, arts, and community development projects. Central to this plan was UNC Chapel Hill, which created and sponsored a number of projects aimed at the cultural enlightenment of rural communities in North Carolina.

Although the majority of students at UNC Chapel Hill were from the middle-to-upper classes, poor white southerners are the subjects of several of the Playmakers’ productions. Many of these plays are comedies, but *Fixin’s* and *Peggy* both use drama to acknowledge the barriers that exist for poor white women in the South. In each play, a

young woman fights the restrictions of class and gender that she experiences on a tenant farm.

The protagonist of *Fixin's* escapes from her husband's rigid expectations, leaving him for town life and a probable clerical job. In *Peggy*, however, the protagonist longs to go to college, and makes a decision to pursue that dream. Peggy's choice causes her father to have a fatal heart attack, leaving her mother and younger brother with no means of support. Peggy is then forced to abandon her goals and marry a tenant farmer who will provide for her family. Beyond the gender and class issues raised in the scripts of *Peggy* and *Fixin's*, the connection of these plays to the Carolina Playmakers raises additional questions about regional representation.

Playwrights at UNC Chapel Hill were encouraged to write about what they knew, and, overall, the Playmakers' stage reflected regional issues within a local context, challenging popular culture views of southern poverty, and troubling notions of a singular national identity. Williamson, Paul Green, and Erma Green wrote these plays about and for the small North Carolina towns in which they grew up. Regardless of whether the characters in their

plays were drawn from personal experience, or are seen as metaphors for larger issues in the South, salvation for the women in *Peggy* and *Fixin's* rests in their escape to an urban, middle-class, white femininity. Examining these plays helps to understand the ways that gender and class were framed in higher education in the 1920s South, providing a sense of why poor white southern women were culturally and theatrically relevant to these students.

Paul Green's *The House of Connelly* (1931) is a compelling example of how national and regional struggles make their way onto the stage. Green wrote two endings for the play, a drama about the crumbling economic and social order of the post-Civil War South. One ending suggests that the beginning of a new South will flourish through a marriage between the plantation class and the tenant-farm class, but the other ending suggests that the destructive values of both classes make cooperation impossible. Both endings suggest, without commentary, continued racism. Green's inability to choose a single resolution to class conflicts in the South highlights the complexities of social hierarchy in that region.

But complexities of gender are also at work in *House of Connelly*. The marriage in question is between a male plantation owner who does not know how to farm, and a female tenant farmer who expertly reorganizes the management of the plantation, therefore saving the owners from economic ruin. Green's vision of the South recognizes the dangers of class prejudice in that region, and simultaneously sees the absurdity of gender-proscribed roles. At the same time, Green imagines black sharecroppers – all former slaves – as simple-minded, superstitious, and lustful. *The House of Connelly* is the only tenant farm play that depicts African-Americans and whites interacting on stage, providing an opportunity to compare white liberal notions of race and class in the 1930s through both text and production.

The success of Jack Kirkland's *Tobacco Road,* based on the novel by Erskine Caldwell, is an example of how the issues of gender, region and class were subsumed by the money-making interests of Broadway theatre. *Tobacco Road* provided audiences with a view of the poor South that provoked either disgust or laughter – often both. In the world of the play, women are sold, bartered, or disposed

of, and male dominance is asserted over everything from turnips to cars. Many audience members thought that *Tobacco Road* presented a realistic view of the rural South, and Caldwell too believed that the work he and Kirkland were doing was documentary. Caldwell, the son of a Presbyterian minister in White Oak, Georgia, felt that his early years in the South made him sensitive to the lives of rural southerners. When he decided to devote himself solely to his writing in the 1920s, he moved to Maine. Although Caldwell boasted an “insider” view of southern sharecroppers, his work does little to improve popular culture views of them. I argue that, although the Lesters do benefit from notions of white privilege, they represent an “other,” unpalatable form of whiteness.

It is important to note that within the category of southern white trash there are separate regional groups, namely the clear social distinctions between poor mountain “hillbillies” and the flatlanders that worked tenant farms. Certain similarities do exist, however, in the ways that poor women are characterized throughout the South through notions of sexuality and moral virtue. It is therefore useful to point to significant examples of white trash

sexual stereotypes, which I discuss in two non-tenant farm examples, *Po' White Trash* at the beginning of this chapter, and *A Shotgun Splicin'* in the following chapter.

The plays analyzed here were performed in three major theatrical venues: the community-based little theatre movement;[8] the liberal, left-wing Group Theatre with subsequent connections to the Federal Theatre Project; and the mass-appeal, money-making interests of Broadway. I am interested in how, through each venue, distinct class, race, gender, and regional struggles played out through live performance. While the Group produced plays for New York audiences, their work was not stimulated by the same commercial concerns that held the focus of Broadway producers. Instead, the Group was motivated by performances that pushed artistic and social boundaries. Each of these plays focuses on the same basic scenario, a poor white southern woman whose cultural position as a sexual object keeps her from escaping tenant farming and achieving individual success in middle-class culture. Changes in venue, however, reveal differences in the ways gender and

[8] The little theatre movement began in the United States around 1912, following the trend of independent theatres in Europe. The little

class were represented for specific audiences. The Carolina Playmakers' cultural moment was rooted in a concern for community and educational interests, so these issues are at the forefront of my research of *Peggy* and *Fixin's*. The Group's political focus, combined with their use of the acting Method,[9] is significant to understanding their production of *The House of Connelly*. For *Tobacco Road*, on the other hand, production choices motivated by box office revenue are critical to recognizing that play's cultural position and influence.

Each theatrical form that I am analyzing served different audiences, and these differences are significant to both concepts of regional identity and of white trash. Within these theatrical forms, I look at how these plays represent poor white southern women, and how those representations relate to notions of poverty, gender, and nationalism. Further, I ask what representations of poor white women as sexual objects mean in relation to questions of class and status. Although these venues are discreet,

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theatres strove to introduce new developments in drama and production to communities throughout the country (Brockett 495-496).

[9] The Method, briefly defined, is based on the work of Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavsky, and teaches that actors can reveal subtleties hidden in the text by believing the imaginary world of the

the similarity of representation across venues speaks to broader notions of national stereotypes. In each of these plays the poor white female becomes a fetishized object, which contributes to her overall popular culture image in the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation follows a chronological format, in that I analyze the plays as they appear historically because it is essential that I approach them within an unfolding historical framework. The background of white trash representation addressed in this introductory chapter lays the foundation for the historical inquiry covered in later chapters. In addition to my primary methodology, I use historical documents that frame the social and cultural position of poor white southern women between 1920 and 1941.

Chapter two analyzes two plays from the Carolina Playmakers. *Peggy* and *Fixin's* illustrate the kinds of gender and class representations an audience would witness on the Playmakers' stage. Both plays represent the most

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play and connecting with the emotional life of their character based on

well-known and successful little theatre organization in the South. This chapter focuses on the relation of higher education for women to the activities of the Playmakers, how developments between each were affected by the women's rights movement of the 1920s, and how these developments in turn influenced the kinds of poor white female characters the Playmakers presented.

In chapter three I connect the little theatre movement to the Group Theatre, and their influence on national theatrical development during the Great Depression. Paul Green's difficulty with the ending of *The House of Connelly* reflects the complications of regional struggles within a New York-based left-wing theatre. This chapter deals with changes in national views of region and class during the Depression, changes in the way theatre reflected and/or challenged these views, and the ways poor women — white and black — were staged in the Group's production.

Chapter four, also focusing on Depression-era theatre, analyzes the Broadway success of *Tobacco Road*. Unlike Green's dilemma over *The House of Connelly*'s ending, Kirkland and Caldwell made clear decisions about class,

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personal experience and observation of real life.

race, and gender in *Tobacco Road*. Extreme stereotypes of poor white women are crucial to the play's action, and I frame these representations within the larger context of Depression-era culture. I compare the play to the book it is based on, along with Caldwell's other attempts to represent poor southern whites for mass culture. Response to both Caldwell's work and representations appearing in northern images of the South, particularly by the Southern Agrarians, are central to this chapter.

My final chapter draws conclusions from the analysis of the dissertation, making connections to the ways white trash women appeared in popular culture after 1941. Rather than determining a clear answer to my research questions, this project in many ways raises more questions—about the ways gender, class, and race merge through performance and performance texts; about the ways history frames poverty and class; about the ways that gender does not get framed in many historical analyses; and about the role of nationalism in constructions of popular culture representation.

What's a Poor Girl to Do? The Carolina Playmakers, Education, and Rural Uplift

> SAIREY-SAM: And her a-lettin' on that the young-un was a-needin' 'at air Castoria[10] so bad. Nary a grain o' sati'faction 'd she gimme 'bout that young-un.
>
> PINK: Hit's *her'n!*
>
> SAIREY-SAM: You hain't a-tellin' hit! Well, hain't she fixed herself?—Allus a-takin' on about 'er bein' so smart for book-larnin'.[11]
>
> *A Shotgun Splicin'*
>
> Gertrude Wilson Coffin

In Gertrude Wilson Coffin's play *A Shotgun Splicin'*[12] (1928), Dicey, the mountain girl Sairey-Sam and Pink are discussing, has never fit traditional ideas about a woman's role in the community. She has spent her young life

[10] Castoria is a town in Western North Carolina.
[11] SAIREY-SAM: And she said that baby needed the fresh air of Castoria. She didn't give me a grain of information about whose baby that is.
PINK: It's hers!
SAIREY-SAM: You don't say! Well, ain't she fixed herself? — Always talking about how smart she is at book-learnin'.

immersed in books and hoping to continue her education beyond the local high school. Dicey did so well in school that Squire Ben Bayles, currently running for State Legislature, pays for her to attend college. He suggests she show her appreciation for his goodwill, seduces Dicey, and gets her pregnant, ruining any real opportunity she may have to get a college degree. When her brother Amos, a preacher, tries to force a shotgun wedding between Dicey and Bayles, she refuses, announcing her love for Fate Gaddy. Dicey and Fate marry, and Amos, happy with the turn of events, agrees to raise the illegitimate baby, stating "'Druther have a bastard in the fam'ly than a damn' legislater!" (308)

When Coffin's play, in which she also performed as Dicey, toured the mountain area of Western North Carolina where she grew up, a local Ministerial Association was appalled[13]. Drawing up a resolution requesting that the play be banned, the ministers sent their challenge to the president of the university, as well as to Frederick Koch, founder and director of the Carolina Playmakers. They

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[12] Splicin' is slang for "marriage."

[13] *A Shotgun Splicin'* toured as part of the Carolina Playmakers' twenty-first tour of North Carolina and Tennessee.

stated that they “do not believe that a young woman should be trained at the state University to play the role of an adultress and the mother of a bastard child whose stage father is another student, a young man playing the part of her seducer” (in *Carolina Folk-plays* 289). How, they asked, could the state be proud of its university, if that institution trained women to create such drama? Their indignation made the front page of one of the mountain community papers, with the headline: MINISTERS FLAY SPLICIN’ DRAMA OF PLAYMAKERS—Girls Should Not Be Trained That Way, They Complain—*University Gets Protest.* Koch responded with equal religious fervor, “We recall in this connection the case of Mary Magdalene and Jesus’ rebuke to his disciples: ‘Why trouble ye the woman? For she has wrought a good work’” (289).

Sairey-Sam’s conversation with Pink, the town loafer, highlights the continual problem facing poor white southern female characters drawn by students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Their book smarts are deplored by others in their communities, and the use of their sexuality, imagined or real, dooms their hopes for a better future. Coffin’s play simultaneously challenges and

reinforces gender restrictions. Dicey does not apologize or express shame for having an illegitimate child, nor does she accept her brother's insistence on marrying the child's father, although this marriage would provide her with economic stability.

*A Shotgun Splicin'*s treatment of gender is more complex, however, than a rejection of the status quo. While Dicey's independence from and denunciation of patriarchal rule-making shows a radical departure from the behavior expected in mountain communities of the 1920s, as evidenced by the indignation of the Ministerial Association, Dicey ultimately reinforces the conservative gender roles of her community, and appeases her brother, by marrying Fate. Her education falls by the wayside, and is never discussed, except by Sairey-Sam. Despite Dicey's intelligence and success with "book larnin'," her sexuality literally "fixes" her in the most conservative version of wife and mother. It is important to acknowledge Coffin's presence as playwright and actor here; the headline "Girls Should Not Be Trained That Way" refers directly to her work as a member of the Playmakers. Dicey's rejection of her community and brother's rules, emphasized by her brother's

status as a preacher, was embodied by Coffin's performance in front of her home community. Despite the play's traditional ending, Coffin's work represents a challenge to the dominant ideology of 1920s rural North Carolina. Koch's refusal to apologize for Coffin's script and performance indicates the importance of women as active members of the Carolina Playmakers.

This chapter focuses on the work of the Carolina Playmakers and their relationship to images of southern culture, women and education, and the development of folk drama, all of which is critical to understanding the influence of their productions in rural communities. My interest is in the treatment of poor white female tenant farm characters on the Playmakers' stage through Harold Williamson's *Peggy, a Tragedy of a Tenant Farmer* (1922), and Erma and Paul Green's *Fixin's, a Tragedy of the Tenant Farm Woman* (1924). I discuss *Peggy* in relation to women and higher education in the South, specifically at UNC Chapel Hill, and connect *Fixin's* to responses to folk drama movement. Although both of these plays are folk dramas, *Fixin's* toured with the Playmakers for ten years — from 1924-1934 — and audience response is well documented.

Therefore, looking at that play in terms of the folk drama movement enables me to see the influence a folk play may have had over an extended period of time and documents its influence beyond that of a literary object.

The Playmakers presented critically acclaimed productions that offered audiences views of the rural South that both reinforced and challenged popular culture imagery, and their ability to inspire both students and audiences to value their hometowns as rich cultural landscapes made their work influential in that region. Many of the original plays produced by the Playmakers featured poor white characters, which were shown as sometimes noble, sometimes ridiculous, depending on whether the play was a tragedy or comedy, but all were supposedly written from what and whom students knew. Connections between education and southern culture are critical to the analysis of these plays because the creation of the Carolina Playmakers grew out of anxieties around these issues. Moreover, the Playmakers' purpose throughout the company's existence was to improve the culture, education, and reputation of rural North Carolina.

Along with changing ideas about region, race, and ethnicity, women's rights were shifting dramatically in America in the 1920s. Women had obtained the right to vote in 1920, and in 1923 the first Equal Rights Amendment was introduced to Congress. Over half of the plays performed by the Playmakers on tour and published in *Carolina Folk Plays* were written by female students at Chapel Hill, and the call for women's rights can be found in many of their plays. In addition to bringing the "local color" of rural North Carolina to the stage, these plays challenge ideas about class, gender, and regional prejudices.

The environment of *Peggy* and *Fixin's* creation and production connects these plays to feminist issues in higher education in the 1920s. I use these plays to, as Jill Dolan suggests, analyze not "simply the superficial structure of performance but also its effect on the culture and the search for modes of effective social change" (89). By looking at *Peggy* and *Fixin's* within the frame of higher education, the changes in the development of female tenant farm characters that take place through the productions of *The House of Connelly* and *Tobacco Road* emerge as shifts in perceptions of gender, class, and region.

The female Playmakers typically did not write plays about tenant farmers, focusing instead on issues like witchcraft, urban poverty, and, like Coffin, mountain communities[14]. The two tenant farm dramas written and produced by the Playmakers — *Peggy* and *Fixin's* — feature female protagonists struggling with issues relevant to the women's movement, higher education for women and economic equality, although neither one was solely authored by a female student. Further, the ways that Williamson and the Greens frame poor white womanhood suggest certain folk culture beliefs about "authentic" representations. Because of the Playmakers' role in the development of folk drama, these plays form the foundation of tenant farm theatre texts, and the other two plays in this dissertation, *The House of Connelly* and *Tobacco Road*, directly evolved out of the Playmakers' work.

[14] Playmaker Lulu Volmer wrote perhaps the most well-known play about a mountain woman, *Sun-Up* (1923). *Sun-up* is the story of Ma Cagle, whose father and husband have both been killed by revenue agent Zeb Turner. Her son, Rufus, has been drafted to fight in WWI, and Cagle is told that he has been killed in action. In her anger at the government, Cagle shelters an army deserter for over a year. Rufus returns unexpectedly and tells his mother that the soldier she is protecting is the son of Zeb Turner. Although Cagle insists that Rufus kill the soldier, he is unable to and releases him. His non-violent resolve is tested further when his girlfriend is attacked by the local sheriff.

The Southern Image and Education

At the start of the twentieth century, popular culture images of the South showed a region that was “brutal and backward, un-American” (Kirby 1). *Baltimore Sun* editor H.L. Mencken[15], in his 1917 essay, “The Sahara of the Bozarts,” (a play on the term ‘beaux arts’) said of the South:

> It is, indeed, amazing to contemplate so vast a vacuity. One thinks of the interstellar spaces, of the colossal reaches of the now mythical ether. . . .If the whole of the late Confederacy were to be engulfed by a tidal wave tomorrow, the effect upon the civilized minority of men in the world would be but little greater than that of a flood on the Yang-tse-kiang. . . . There is not. . .a single opera house, or a single theatre devoted to decent plays. (quoted in Selden, *Frederick Henry Koch* 10)

Southern scholars and politicians quickly became familiar with Mencken’s newspaper essay, and were enraged. In the

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Instead of killing the sheriff, Rufus brings him back to the jail to stand trial, after which Rufus is appointed the new sheriff.

[15] Mencken was editor of *The Baltimore Sun*. While Maryland is officially a southern state, its location separates the city culturally from the Deep South, and Mencken did not identify as a southerner.

1920s, “Sahara of the Bozarts” became an influential document in decisions about where the South might be headed.[16] Mencken’s attack on southern culture made visible on a national scale that region’s weaknesses by mocking them. This mockery in turn galvanized the South, instigating change specifically in education.

Through the essay’s attack on and subsequent response from southern educators and politicians, it worked as an act of defacement, a “complicity between the critic and the object” in which the defacement “engages internally with the object defaced” (43). Mencken’s defacement strengthened interest in modernization of the South because “By virtue of such mimetic and metonymic engagement, the energy emerging from defacement is an energy flowing from an active and activated object of critique” (43). The essay was not viewed passively; many educators and policy makers in the South either quoted Mencken while lobbying for changes within their communities, or used his essay as an example of how misled Northern thinkers were in regards to

[16] Mencken, despite his disgust with the South, married Alabamian Sara Haardt, head of the Alabama branch of the National Women's Party, who led the battle to have the Alabama Legislature ratify the 19th Amendment giving women the vote in 1920.

Southern culture.[17] Progressivism in the South, with its general focus on moving the region into the national landscape while retaining southern distinctiveness, was strongly influenced by suggestions of cultural inferiority.

The state of North Carolina and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were central in shifting national views of the South, with attention particularly focused on the state's educational and cultural developments. At the beginning of the twentieth century, North Carolina was predominantly comprised of small towns, and the majority of the population worked agricultural jobs[18]. The state's rural status had a significant impact on the economy. Unlike the Northeast, southern states in the early 1900s lacked the industrial power that drew people to towns and cities (McCandless 7). Data on the per capita wealth of North Carolinians reflects the impact of industrial versus agricultural employment: only $447 compared to $1,711 in New York, $1,449 in Massachusetts, and $1,424 in Pennsylvania (Coon 66-67).

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[17] See Ayers, Conkin, Daniel, Grantham, Henderson, Kirby, Koch, Seldon.

[18] The 1905 census reports showed that only 17.9 percent of the population lived in incorporated towns, and, aside from Mississippi, it was the only southern state that did not have any towns with populations over 25,000. Of the 347 towns in North Carolina, 281 had populations of 1000 or fewer (Coon 23-24).

With most of the state's residents living in either very small towns or rural areas, and with such limited per capita wealth, North Carolina was an unlikely state to achieve regional and national prominence in education and the arts. Between 1905 and 1917, North Carolina struggled to improve education throughout the state, but in 1918, at the close of World War I, the governor and legislature increased their efforts. Governor Thomas W. Bickett argued patriotism and state loyalty, pushing the legislature to require compulsory school attendance and implement child labor laws. Bickett's line of reasoning, which successfully motivated the legislature to adopt his educational reforms, stated that "ample provision for the welfare of the children" would be the "worthiest memorial to the soldiers who had made the supreme sacrifice in the war" (Henderson, *North Carolina* 559).

North Carolina spent an enormous amount of energy and funds between 1918 and 1929 on increasing and "normalizing" its educational system in relation to schools in the northeast. Consolidating schools and transporting students changed the educational environment for rural students

dramatically.[19] The state measured the worth of its schools by the physical plant it occupied and the education and training of its teachers. The quality of a school's physical plant was gauged by how cramped the classroom was, its furniture and grounds, and the presence of educational apparatuses and library facilities. Based on these criteria, the average value of each school in 1903-1904 was $170, which the state sought to improve in the following sixteen years (Coon 13). In 1920, the average school was valued at $3000, but by 1930, the average worth of a North Carolina school was $19,000 (Henderson *North Carolina,* 561).

Dr. Edwin Greenlaw, head of the Department of English at UNC Chapel Hill from 1913 through 1925, resolved to work against negative images of the South on the university level. Greenlaw developed an agenda to encourage southern writers to focus on their home region, and to persuade young college students to express their feelings of home creatively. Greenlaw researched innovative, community-

[19] In 1919-1920, there were over four thousand one-teacher schools, and by the end of the 1920s only two thousand remained; the number of consolidated schools leaped from 355 in 1921-1922 to 988 in 1929-1930, and 567 of these had eight or more teachers. Only 247 students were transported to school in 1914, all by horse drawn vehicles, but by

oriented college professors who might be interested in moving to a small, southern town, hoping to find a scholar and practitioner who could bring national attention to the literary work of UNC Chapel Hill students (Selden, *Frederick Henry Koch*, 11).

Greenlaw's search led to Frederick Koch, then teaching at the University of North Dakota, and making a name for himself through the direction of the Dakota Playmakers. The Dakota Playmakers were formed in 1906, the first year that Koch taught at the university, and they toured the state with original plays about North Dakota that were written, produced and performed by students. Koch, trained by George Pierce Baker at Harvard, was exactly the kind of teacher Greenlaw was looking for. He agreed to move to Chapel Hill in 1918. Historians identify Koch as the founder of the folk drama movement in the United States, and his connection to UNC Chapel Hill was influential in establishing theatre education in American colleges and universities, along with the work of Baker at Harvard and Yale, and Thomas Wood Stevens at the Carnegie Institute of

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1929, a total of 181,141 students were transported, primarily by motor bus (Henderson *North Carolina*, 561).

Technology, where the first degree granting program in theatre began in 1914 (Brockett 496).

According to his contemporaries, Koch was charismatic, energetic, passionate, generous, and capable of convincing anyone of an idea simply by the power of his own belief. He was not an administrator, but an instigator, “He sang to his work and about it, and his song made it dance with life” (Selden, “Frederick Henry Koch” 5). When Koch died in 1941, the Carolina Playmakers essentially died with him, lasting only three more years. *Pioneering a People’s Theatre: The Carolina Playbook, Memorial Edition* (1944), was published as a “cross section of the life and growth of The Carolina Playmakers,” and is a moving tribute to Koch’s work[20]. Director Samuel Selden and Historian Archibald Henderson both compare Koch to Johnny Appleseed, saying, “He too carried with him a bag of magical seeds which he

[20] *Pioneering* chronicles how the organization brought theatre to “hundreds of thousands” of audiences through indoor and outdoor productions, radio broadcasts, pageants, and historical dramas, highlighting the Playmaker’s ability to create a “. . . stimulating influence of this preoccupation with the drama and the theatre, which rapidly pervaded North Carolina and the Southeastern area, eventually spreading throughout the entire country and into Canada, and focused attention upon Chapel Hill as a radiating center of inspiration and as a beacon light to the younger generation” (Henderson V).

planted in many fertile places” (1). Kai Heiberg-Jurgensen argues that Koch, through university extension activities, “built dramatic activity in North Carolina until the state was called ‘the most theatre-going in the Union” (54). Theatre historian Arthur Hobson Quinn, in a 1940 speech at Chapel Hill said of Koch, “The best way to epitomize his service is to try to imagine what the American drama would have been during the last twenty-one years without him” (54). Not only had Koch inspired community-based theatre throughout North Carolina, but several other states used his work as a marker against which they created and measured the success of their own community theatres.

Peggy, the South, and Higher Education for Women

Koch enthusiastically promoted Harold Williamson’s *Peggy* (1922) as the first play about southern sharecroppers in American theatre. Commenting on the subject matter, he marveled at how “the drab cabin” was transformed by the theatre into “something new, something interesting, something wonderful.” *Peggy* took “a neglected chapter of the Southern scene” and turned it into an “exciting drama” (*Carolina* 1941, 19). The protagonist, Peggy, longs to leave

sharecropping and go to college, or at the very least get a clerical job in town. This idea is encouraged by Wesley MacDonald, the landowner's son, who is a college student visiting home. In the introduction to the play Williamson writes that "The action of the play is a true transcript of the family life of the characters in the play, as I have known them in real life" (*Carolina* 1941, 19). Did Williamson grow up on a farm that employed sharecroppers? Did he model the character of Wesley after himself, the college student visiting home, or did he know someone like Wesley — a brother or friend perhaps? Because Williamson, unlike Paul Green, did not become a famous writer, little is known of his life before attending UNC Chapel Hill. Based on his statement, "as I have known them in real life," it is probable that Williamson at least knew at some point a woman like Peggy, who dreams of leaving farm life, but exactly how familiar he was with the tenant farm family that *Peggy* is based on is unclear. It is more likely that he drew the characters in the play from observation, but claims "authenticity" under the mantle of folk drama.

At the beginning of the play, Peggy's mother Mag looks for her daughter, as she has farm chores for her to finish.

Mag is informed by Jed, another sharecropper, that her daughter has been talking to Wesley. Jed and Peggy had once been romantically linked, but Peggy has turned cold towards him. Both Mag and Jed leap to the assumption that, if Wesley is talking to Peggy it is because he wants to take advantage of her sexually. Their primary concern is not so much Peggy's safety and honor, but the family's status with the elder McDonald:

> Jed: Yeah, an' if you don't watch out, Mag, there's a tale goin' to git out an' ol' man McDonald'll drive you off'n the place.
>
> Mag: You're right, Jed. Jest wait till me an' her pa gits through with her. We'll put a stop to it. (23).

When Peggy returns she lies to her mother about where she has been, but hints that she has been thinking about a life away from tenant farming. Mag, knowing that Peggy has been talking to Wesley, confronts her. Peggy admits that she and Wesley spoke, but insists that they were only talking about going to college, and that Wesley suggested that she would do well in a university setting. Mag is appalled by her daughter's interest in education:

> Peggy: I reckon it’d be nice to go to school.
>
> Mag: Mebbe it is. If you’d a-been rich schoolin’ might a-done you some good, but you ain’t rich an schoolin’s only for them as is rich. (26)

Like Dicey in *A Shotgun Splicin’,* Peggy’s possible success in school marks her as “other” in her family. Part of Mag’s opposition is practical — how could Peggy afford college? Although Dicey was able to go to college, she was only able to do so by bartering her sexuality, ultimately ruining her chances of completing a college degree. Peggy’s argument for a better life is complicated by her mother’s speculations about Wesley, which, like *A Shotgun Splicin’,* suggest that wealthy men are only interested in exploiting poor women sexually.

Mag insists that Peggy marry Jed, and continue life on a tenant farm. Peggy refuses, and her insistence on her right to a different life causes her father to have a fatal heart attack. His death leaves Mag and Peggy’s little brother with no means of support. Wesley and his father come to the cabin to take care of the dead body, and to discuss Mag’s options with her. While Jed, Mr. McDonald, and Mag take the body to the next room, Peggy and Wesley

discuss her future. She tells him that her mother and father wanted her to marry Jed, and he is sympathetic to her situation. She tells Wesley that she is going to get a job uptown, but he discourages her. Hopeful that this event might turn her life in a new direction, Peggy asks advice:

> Peggy: Well, what can I do?
>
> Wesley: I don’t know . . . . I guess you’d better marry Jed. (32)

Peggy is desperate to avoid life as a sharecropper, but her options continue to dwindle. McDonald tells Mag that, without a man to work the land, she will have to leave the cabin. Despite Mag’s pleas, McDonald insists that it is a business decision. Peggy is then forced to marry Jed, so he can provide for her family. As the play ends, there is a clear sense of horror and despair, as Peggy, craving the world outside of farming, contemplates her future as a sharecropper:

> Jed: You ain’t a-goin to turn me down, air you, Peggy?
>
> Mag: You’ll marry Jed, won’t you Pegg? You ain’t a-goin to see you ol’ ma go to the poorhouse, air you, Pegg?

> Peggy: (after a moment of silence she raises her head and speaks in broken sobs). I reckon . . . it's the only way . . . for me. (34)

That Peggy is trapped in the life of the tenant farmer is half of this play's tragedy. The other half comes from Mag's helplessness. The men in the play have conspired on various levels to direct each woman's life to their own purposes. Peggy's forced marriage reveals a "public secret" — that poor women are not free to choose the direction of their lives, an immobility that is "generally known but cannot be spoken" (Taussig 50). The other characters pretend that Peggy has the ultimate voice, yet they all know that she has only one option.

Peggy's initial refusal to marry Jed reveals her most significant rebellion — it is not her wish to go to college that ultimately kills her father, it is her refusal to accept the public secret. Peggy's desire to go to college is marked by the other characters as abnormal for those in her class position, while marrying a man raised in the tenant culture stands as the status quo. While the world of the play reinforces this concept of Peggy's rights, its framing through a university-based theatre company suggests

that the public secret Peggy denies needs to be re-evaluated. For audiences, the question of education, and specifically education for women, resonated with changes in North Carolina, and throughout the South.

The increased attention paid to education in the lower grades after World War I in North Carolina, which was matched by a dramatic rise in college and university attendance, corresponds with the publication of Mencken's act of defacement in the essay "Sahara of the Bozarts." The state graduated 1,500 high school students in 1921, and by 1924 that number rose to 8,000. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill enrolled 1,200 students in 1920, and saw a leap to 2,529 students enrolled in 1924 (Henderson *The Campus,* 278). In this climate, a young woman's desire to attend college fit neatly within societal expectations, particularly if education would shift her out of an undesirable social stratum. Because of North Carolina's push to modernize the culture and prospects of its citizens, Peggy's wish to get away from the tenant farm and into the middle class world of university life would have been applauded by audiences, and her forced marriage

and future as a sharecropper's wife was particularly tragic.

It would be irresponsible to suggest, however, that higher education for women was universally recognized as desirable, or that many opportunities existed for those women who attended college; the experience of higher education for women in the 1920s was not rife with engineering degrees and doctorates. Dr. Edward Clarke's books, *Sex in Education, or a Fair Chance For the Girls* (1873), and *Building a Brain* (1874) became popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as scientific arguments for women's restricted access to higher education. Clarke argued that women who studied too much would experience a redirection in their proper blood flow, taking vital energy from the ovaries and sending it to their brains, thus endangering their health and potentially destroying their ability to reproduce (Gordon 18). At UNC Chapel Hill, women struggled well into the 1930s to gain access to the school's degree programs, and even then there were restrictions to their presence on campus.

The first women to attend UNC Chapel Hill in the 1890s were only allowed to take classes informally, and were

forced to sit behind screens in the classrooms so “the boys might keep their eyes and minds on their work” (McCandless 89). Although women were admitted officially to graduate courses in 1897 and at the junior and senior level in 1898, their names and photos did not appear in the school annual until 1907. After World War I, at about the time the Playmakers were established, female residents of Chapel Hill were allowed to enter the university in their freshman year. Although allowed to attend, women were not encouraged at Chapel Hill, and when the issue of a women’s dormitory came up in 1923, student and local response overwhelmingly opposed the idea. The president of the athletic association said,

> This is a man’s school and was founded as such. Once co-education is permanently rooted here there will be a substantial increase in the number of male applicants denied entrance. Co-education means inadequate provisions for the advantages which men should enjoy. (quoted in McCandless 90)

The president of the Chapel Hill YMCA stated,

> If a co-ed dormitory is built, it will simply mean the beginning of a flow of co-eds and other female species into the walls of our campus that will never stop until we are all flapperized. (quoted in McCandless 90)

To these men, women and higher education created a binary terror which threatened to dissolve their conceptions of educational prestige. In their social binary, education is the right of (white) men, and any disruption of that notion would ensure “inadequate provisions for the advantages which men should enjoy.” Additionally, these critics feared that women’s presence in the classroom would change the status of UNC Chapel Hill. If it is believed that men are superior intellectually to women, then both sexes cannot succeed equally in the same educational environment; to do so would indicate inferiority of the school, not the equality of the sexes.

Despite these and similar oppositions, the state legislature approved the opening of a women’s dormitory in 1925. As the university enrollment increased, more women attended, but after the Depression, the percentage of females in the student body declined. This shift in

enrollment corresponded with changes in public high school curriculum. Until 1930, women comprised the majority of secondary school students and graduates (Graves xvii). During and after the Depression, however, women were encouraged to pursue vocational training aimed at careers as secretaries, nurses, housewives, and mothers. This change in women's education was connected to the development of the differentiated curriculum in high schools during the 1910s and 1920s. Previously, high school students chose from either a General or Classical curriculum, but the differentiated curriculum directed students into General, Classical, Scientific, Commercial, Art, Domestic Art and Science, or Manual Training (Davis 102). By the 1930s, not only were fewer women attending high schools, but those who did attend were frequently directed into either the Commercial curriculum, which prepared them for office work, or Domestic Art and Science, which prepared them to manage household and mothering duties. Not surprisingly, fewer women were prepared to attend college.

In 1935, the height of the Playmakers' activities[21], only 300 of the students at Chapel Hill were women, although the overall number of women attending college in North Carolina was much higher, due to the consolidation of Chapel Hill, the Women's College at Greensboro, and the State College at Raleigh (Henderson *The Campus,* 289). The student populations at state colleges and universities came largely from the lower-middle class in small towns and farms, and the women who attended these schools most frequently pursued teaching degrees (McCandless 62). Beginning in 1932, undergraduate women in elementary education were barred from Chapel Hill and transferred to Greensboro. At the same time, an 1898 policy that forbade any new admission of women at the freshman and sophomore level was renewed at Chapel Hill and Raleigh (*North Carolina* 598).

These decisions, claimed to be based on financial concerns, had a severe impact on the intellectual environment available to female students, and conveniently reduced the binary terror that women provoked on the Chapel Hill campus. Given that no women pursuing teaching

[21] *Peggy* toured throughout North Carolina in 1923, and *Fixin's* toured

certification were allowed to attend UNC Chapel Hill for the last nine years that the Playmakers toured, produced, and published, none of the women involved were pursuing teaching degrees, although the majority of female college students in North Carolina were getting certified to teach. This in and of itself disrupts the social binary clearly promoted by the transfer of education degrees to Greensboro. Chapel Hill could not undo the terror that had already been done by making the university co-educational, but moving teacher certification to Greensboro would significantly reduce the number of women in attendance. The female Playmakers reinforced the binary terror by not only remaining at Chapel Hill, but by increasing their activities within the organization.

Even with the enrollment restrictions placed on women in North Carolina, the number of women featured by the Playmakers surpassed the involvement of male students. The irony is that none of these women were able to achieve a similar level of success outside of North Carolina, while

from 1924-1934.

male playwrights like Paul Green and Thomas Wolfe[22] achieved international renown. In the publications of *Carolina Folk Plays*, ten female playwrights are represented, while only seven male playwrights are published in the volumes. But even the presence of seven male writers is deceptive — the Playmakers typically had a female student help a male student with "phrasing the speeches of the girl" (Koch *Carolina* 1924, xxi). The women involved in the theatre program at UNC Chapel Hill were not just used to fill female roles or sew costumes, they were vital to the creation and production of the troupe's plays.

Beginning in 1918, UNC Chapel Hill started, along with the Playmakers, the Bureau of Community Drama, an educational extension program for schools and teachers.[23] Bernice Kelly Harris, one of the teachers that participated in the program its first year, returned afterward to her home of Seaboard, North Carolina to introduce playwriting to her students. Harris also wrote a series of folk plays

[22] Thomas Wolfe, known primarily as a novelist, is possibly the most well-known member of the Playmakers. After his graduation from UNC Chapel Hill Wolfe did not pursue theatrical work.

[23] Sarah Gertrude Knott worked as State Representative of the Bureau of Community Drama until she resigned to become founder and director of the National Folk Festival in Washington, D.C., saying "If one state, North Carolina, can do it, why not the United States?" (Koch, *Carolina* xix)

based on the Seaboard community that were performed by community residents and published in 1940 as *Folk Plays of Eastern Carolina* (University of Chapel Hill Press). Green's future wife, Elizabeth Lay, taught courses in playwriting and children's drama in the summer program. Lay's first play, *When Witches Ride*, was one of three one-acts produced by the Playmakers on their first tour through North Carolina and published in their first volume of folk plays in 1922.

The work of Lay and Harris, among many other women, has been virtually lost in the published histories of the Playmakers, which focus on Koch, Green, and director Samuel Seldon. Notably, Lay worked as Koch's assistant, organizing the Playmakers' productions, tours, and publications. In addition to teaching in the Bureau of Community Drama program, Lay also published articles and reviews about theatre in North Carolina in both regional and national journals and newspapers.[24]

Green's published correspondence provides some indication of Lay's work with the Playmakers, in a letter written to her in 1920 while she was editing the company's

first volume of plays. He conveys specific criticisms of Williamson's play, *Peggy*, which are based on the play's perceived inaccuracies:

1. Cotton at 30 c. and labor $1.25 day? No. Out of proportion.
2. Shouldn't Jed address May as "Miss May."[25] A young farm hand who hopes to marry a girl like Peggy would hardly address her mother flatly — "May."
3. Page 8. Peggy should say "go off ter school." She has been to school. Modern times, cotton 30 c.

7.[26] P.22. McDonald is entirely too hard. Not possible that he should speak so carelessly of Warren's body. Overdrawn here. (Avery 38)

Green's edits center on the perception that Williamson's knowledge of tenant farming does not match his own. He writes about *Peggy* from the perspective of a self-appointed expert claiming:

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[24] Lay's articles appeared nationally in *Theatre Magazine* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.
[25] He is referring to Mag.
[26] Green's suggested edits 4-6 refer to time lapses and dialogue "Plainly used to gain suspense."

> All of these observations are made from my viewpoint of the tenant people as I know them in my County. And Williamson's home (Carthage, N.C.) isn't many hundreds of miles from mine. Why not ease up on poor North Carolina landlords just a little bit? (Avery 38)

Ironically, Jim Cooper, the landlord in Green's play *Fixin's,* is just as callous as McDonald. Maybe Green was trying to impress Lay with his knowledge of drama, and Williamson's play provided an outlet for his intellectual preening. Green made similar suggestions for revision to Lay's play, *When Witches Ride*. His suggestions were ignored in each play, perhaps because Lay, who had already graduated from UNC Chapel Hill the year before, trusted her own judgment above Green's, who was still an undergraduate.

Without question, Lay's work with the Playmakers was essential to the company's success, as Koch's only fault, according to his eulogizers, was his lack of organizational abilities. She traveled throughout the state as Field Director for the Bureau of Community Drama helping with the logistics and organization of play productions, a job she also performed for the New York Department of Rural Social

Organization after her marriage to Green in 1922.[27] Lay was responsible for most of the writing in the book *Play Production for Amateurs* (1922), which was attributed to Koch, Lay, John E. Lear, and Norman M. Paull. She also wrote the textbook *A Study Course in Modern Drama* (1921).[28]

The interest that female students at UNC Chapel Hill had in creating plays corresponds with the development of women's literature on other college campuses throughout the United States. College women's fiction, published in yearbooks and literary magazines, provides one of the few resources, aside from memoirs and letters, for these students' own views on women's higher education. Overall, these writings reveal melancholy over the "cultural and social barriers that women faced on and off campus," with many of the short stories written by female students in the early twentieth century addressing scenarios of "boy meets educated girl and complications ensue" (Gordon 9). The plays written by the female members of the Playmakers reflect similar issues. The women writing for the

[27] After graduating with a bachelor's degree in Philosophy from UNC Chapel Hill, Green got an M.A. in Philosophy at Cornell in Ithaca, New York. The Department of Rural Social Organization was affiliated with Cornell (Avery 85).

[28] Both books were published by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press.

Playmakers created a variety of female characters with difficult problems: women who possess supernatural powers and are feared by entire communities; old spinsters abandoned by friends and relatives; young, morally upright shop clerks deceived by wealthy citizens; and mothers abandoned by their husbands and left to support their families in the mills.

These scenes of hardship and misery suggest an uncertainty about women's acceptance in the larger culture. Unlike the fiction published by other female college students, the Playmakers' touring circuit and publications enabled the ideas of these playwrights to circulate widely[29]. Nevertheless, none of these women became well-known writers[30]. The presence of the female members of the Playmakers, however, is as important to recognize as the female characters onstage.

Fixin's, The Playmakers, and Folk Drama

[29] The Playmakers toured throughout North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Massachusetts, Missouri, Texas, Washington, D.C., and New York. Several of the plays were published in collections like *Carolina Folk Plays* (1922, 1924, 1928, 1941), *Carolina Folk Comedies* (1931), *American Folk Plays* (1939), *Folk Plays of Eastern Carolina* (1940), and *Alabama Folk Plays* (1943) (Henderson *Playbook* 103-104).

[30] Lulu Vollmer, though from North Carolina, did not work with the Playmakers.

Regardless of Koch's proclamation that his students write plays about their homes and the people they grew up with, some of their work was based more on observation than experience. The Playmakers' folk culture dramatizations, particularly the "negro drama" and "tenant-farm plays," were based on interpretations of and experiences with "othered" cultures in the South, and were, in their time, intended as documentary plays that would help equalize racial and class divisions (Koch *Carolina* 1941, xv). Through the Playmakers' touring productions, Koch asserted that they took "the plays back to the people—often to the very locality in which they originated" (*Carolina* 1924, xxiv). Some of the declarations for equality that the Playmakers promoted would not have been applauded in many of the communities they visited if those assertions had been voiced directly. In the frame of fictional characters and folk drama, however, the Playmakers' social agendas were somewhat veiled.

Critical to the power of folk culture is its claim of authenticity, which for Koch was defined by his students writing only of characters and plots with which they had personal connections. Paul and Erma Greens' familiarity

with the difficulties of farm life came from their own upbringing. While not tenant farmers, the Greens were not well-off. Their father typically had three to four sharecropping families to help with the farm, but it was also essential for Paul and his younger brother Hugh to work the land for the farm to survive. Erma and her three sisters ran the house on their own after their mother died in 1908. They attended a local school, the Baptist Buies Creek Academy, but going to college meant working a few years and saving money to put themselves through school (Avery xv). These details are an important element of the Greens' writing; like many of the Playmakers, farming was one occupation they knew well, and this direct experience was used to support the troupe's claims of authenticity, despite the fact that Green's farming experience was always in the position of landlord.

Paul Green became the most well-known playwright to emerge from Koch's classroom, writing the Pulitzer prize-winning *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926), Group Theatre productions *The House of Connelly* (1931) and *Johnny Johnson* (1936), and the long-running historical pageant *The Lost*

Colony (1937).[31] Green and his sister Erma's play *Fixin's* chronicles the struggles and frustrations of tenant farmer Lilly Robinson through her return to her rural home from a trip to visit her cousin in the town of Dunn. Lilly and her husband Ed have just sold their most recent crop of cotton, and she hopes that her part of the money will be spent on "fixin's" for their home. Ed has heard rumors from his landlord Jim Cooper that Lilly went out with a strange man while visiting her cousin, but he immediately rejects the gossip. Jim pushes his point:

> Lies or no lies, that's not the question. It's this. Ed — Are you goin' ter let her with her honey-sugar ways keep you from being a man? (89)

Jim wants Ed to buy some land from him, and knows that Lilly's cotton money is the only purchasing power available to the Robinsons. Jim uses the question of manliness — "Are you goin' ter let her with her honey-sugar ways keep you from being a man?" — to push Ed toward his goal. Despite Lilly's hard work on her plot of cotton, the money is legally Ed's, since he is the male head of the household.

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[31] *The Lost Colony*, the story of the first settlers at Jamestown, is the first outdoor historical drama to open in the United States. The play

The rumors of Lilly's infidelity, while disturbing to Ed, are not as powerful as the implication that she is in charge of their marriage; her suggested effect on his manhood influences him to buy the farm land.

When Lilly arrives home that night, Ed confronts her for her alleged betrayal, and she responds by attacking him for working her hard on the farm:

> LILLY: 'Tain't the first time they've talked about me, and — it may not be the last, if you cain't treat me any better than you have to-night.
>
> ED: What . . . you . . . mean?
>
> LILLY: I mean that I ain't goin' to be stormed at and driv 'round like a dumb brute by a slave-drivin' husband — that's what! (101)

Ed tries to defend himself, but Lilly replies by criticizing his disregard for her needs and happiness, claiming "You'd *kill* any woman God ever made, with your hard, stingy ways" (104 emphasis in original). Lilly does not rush to defend her honor, using the possibility of her infidelity to unnerve Ed while she focuses on his cruelness

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closed during World War II, but otherwise has run continuously since

as a husband. Specifically, she accuses Ed of being miserly with their money, and murdering their son Charlie, who died of an unnamed illness. While Charlie was sick, Ed refused to spare the money needed for a doctor, fearing that he would not have enough saved to buy land. Living on and working his own land was so important to Ed, that it never occurred to him that his son might die if he did not give up the money. Lilly's discussion of Charlie's death weakens Ed, and he promises that he will be a better husband. Lilly asks him to use her cotton money to buy a bedroom suite she saw in town, and Ed finally has to admit that her money is gone. Lilly lashes back, saying:

> Oh, yes, the same way you done time and time ag'in — give me a cotton patch, and then by hook or crook get me to believing you needed it worse'n I did. Women don't need money lak men, do they? (114)

Lilly's anger toward Ed is focused on his disregard for her needs, emotional and financial, but she is also fed up with his obsession with land. She explains that her rumored lover is actually her cousin's new husband, and Ed, happy

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1937.

that she has been faithful, and feeling guilty for using her cotton money, prepares to cancel the deal with Jim. At that moment, Jim knocks on the door, curious about the noise coming from the Robinson home. He berates Ed for letting Lilly “run over” him, and attacks Lilly for denying Ed his chance to own land. During Jim’s tirade, Lilly has been quietly putting her coat and hat on and, when Jim has finished, picks up her suitcase, telling Ed that she is leaving him:

> I’m . . . jest . . . goin’. You all can fix up about the money to suit yourselves. I don’t want none of it. (116)

Lilly’s plans are not revealed; it is only clear that she is walking away from tenant farm life. The stage directions suggest her departure is composed and determined. She has realized that her husband will never change, and decides to pursue a better life independently. The play ends with Ed and Jim confused about what has happened, uncertain of how Lilly could so calmly escape their efforts to control her.

Like *Peggy, Fixin’s* offers audiences a heroine burdened with the social, economic, and cultural restrictions of tenant farm life. Two of the most popular

plays produced by the Playmakers, touring productions revealed the problems of the characters onstage to audience members throughout the Southeast, Texas, and cities in the Northeast. The company of twenty students traveled in a white bus called “The Playmakers’ Special,” followed by a truck carrying the stage equipment. In their first tour they played in only seven of the larger North Carolina towns, but as their reputation grew they performed throughout many of the states smaller towns as well, often visiting up to twenty-six communities in one tour schedule. The Playmakers’ arrival was preceded by posters, which were hung throughout the towns to advertise their performances.

Rural communities, many of which had never hosted theatre productions, were enthusiastic about the Playmakers’ tours. Koch cites their arrival in Lincolnton, North Carolina as an example of how rural towns heralded live theatre. As the Playmakers approached Lincolnton, they were greeted by a “procession of automobiles decorated with Carolina flags and banners.” This procession, with car horns honking, then guided the company down Main Street, whose sidewalks were filled with applauding citizens (*Carolina* 1924 xxvii). During the Playmakers’ 1924 tour,

the first to feature *Fixin's*, they performed in the mountain town of Candler, which at the time had less than twenty inhabitants. The company's reputation attracted over seven hundred audience members to that performance, all of whom traversed undeveloped mountain roads in the rain to reach the town (xxv).

It is impossible to overstate the effect the Playmakers had on the towns of North Carolina. Given the cultural isolation that many of these communities experienced, theatre of any kind would have been welcome, but the intensity of the experience was heightened by the plays' subject matter. As W.O. Saunders, editor of the *Elizabeth City Independent* wrote after a Playmakers' performance, "The home folks took to the home-made drama as to home-made sausage and corncakes on a frosty morning" (quoted in *Carolina* 1924, xxv). The characters on stage were not fancy out-of-towners; they were plain country people, just like their audiences.

As the Playmakers toured outside of North Carolina, reaction to the plays, while overwhelmingly positive, shows clear differences in perception between northern, urban,

and local rural southern critics. A 1929 article in New York's *Theatre Magazine* states:

> The rare characters and the homely qualities of these plays linger in one's memory long after some of the more sophisticated plays of Broadway have been forgotten. In fact, each time we witness a program of the CAROLINA FOLK PLAYS, we feel for the moment that we, too, are just 'folks'—along with those other folks on the other side of the footlights, who transport us for a brief but happy period back to their hill country, with its rich traditions, legends, and folklore. (Kehoe)

This reviewer sees the struggles of the rural South with a nostalgia and sentimentality that suggests a total remove from the experiences brought to light on the stage. The "happy period" he refers to is absent from the majority of plays produced by the Playmakers, and is certainly not present in *Peggy* and *Fixin's*. Becoming like one of the "folk" onstage, however, despite the complexities of authenticity, often meant acknowledging the importance of higher education for women, the right for women to control

their own earnings, and the physically brutal life of the rural poor.

In the South, on the other hand, audiences saw the characters in *Fixin's* as reflections of the frustrations around them. During a tour of North Carolina, the *Greensboro Daily News* reported, "*Fixin's* presented a scene of such stark and terrible reality as to make at least one person in the audience want to rise up and say, 'This thing has got to be stopped'" (Koch *Carolina* 1941, xvi). The physical and geographical isolation of rural life in the South, due partially to the agricultural occupations of many southerners, combined with the lack of adequate roads, increased the cultural isolation many southerners felt. Part of Lilly's crisis comes from her need to connect with a larger community than she can find on a tenant farm, and she is also demoralized by her status on that farm; as long as she stays she will be unable to make even the smallest decisions about the quality of her life. *Fixin's* suggestion that a woman's desires are equal to those of her husband further connects the play to issues circulating around women's place in higher education.

The activities of the Playmakers' female playwrights, and the significance of the scripts supporting women's rights (written by both male and female students), are rarely recognized. The circulation of these ideas and achievements extended well beyond the university setting, outside of urban audiences, and into small towns throughout the rural South. The familiarity of these plays' subject matter in the North Carolina towns they toured is suggested by the editor of *The Smithfield Herald*, Johnston County's newspaper:

> *Fixin's* went straight to the hearts of those present. Too many times had that scene been enacted before their eyes in real life. The simple story of the tenant farmer's wife was too true to mean actual enjoyment to the spectators. The scene might just as well have been in Johnston County as in Harnett. It was typical of this, the cotton section of North Carolina. (in *Carolina* 1924, xviii)

Unlike the response in *Theatre Magazine*, this reviewer sees the bitter misery that rural poverty causes, and recognizes its effects on local audiences. In Johnson County, there

was no sense of nostalgia presented onstage; *Fixin's* was "too true to mean actual enjoyment." This reaction suggests that Koch's edict for students to "write about what they know" was successful, an indication that, although these plays seem melodramatic now, they worked well as realism in their cultural moment. It is equally important to recognize that, like Gertrude Wilson Coffin and her play *A Shotgun Splicin'*, Playmaker playwrights often acted in their own plays. Given Koch's emphasis on writing, it is probable that these students also performed "what they know." Movement, inflection, accent, and other details of characterization undoubtedly were gleaned from observations of people in their home communities, as well as in the communities they visited on tour.

Reactions to *Fixin's* as a realistic portrayal of marital strife were not isolated to rural audiences in the South. Tours outside of North Carolina's rural communities inspired equally passionate responses. According to Koch, an audience member in Atlanta approached him the day after a performance saying:

> I come from New York, and I've been seeing the best shows in the theatre there for thirty years.

> But that little play last night got to me so much that, before I went to bed, I went to the Western Union office and telegraphed some flowers to my wife in New York! (Koch *Carolina* 1941, xvi)

Here the play ceased to be a dramatic account of the hardships of sharecroppers, and became a symbol of the value of a woman's life. Although this audience member's response may additionally be seen as an example of Whisnant's view of northern fascination with southern culture, it also was used by Koch's to support his belief in folk performance as "universal."

The Playmakers' productions offer the most positive use of the female tenant farmer character in the development of folk drama that I study in this dissertation.[32] The heroines in *Peggy* and *Fixin's* are honest, hard-working women who have been crushed in their attempts to create a better life for themselves. Both women defy mainstream expectations of their gender and class, challenging the patriarchy and asserting their independence. Layered on top of that history is the presence of the female Playmakers who, despite restrictions

on women at Chapel Hill, managed to assert their ideas within that community more fully than their male counterparts. These details are significant to the larger cultural importance of *Peggy* and *Fixin's* within the development of the poor white southern female character in folk drama, and offer a sharp contrast to the character's evolution as it moves out of the South and into the politics of region and gender in the cultural center of New York.

[32] Although *The House of Connelly* and *Tobacco Road* are not always defined as folk plays, they developed out of the folk drama movement.

Paul Green and the Group Stage *The House of Connelly*

> BIG SUE. [*wrenching a broken rail out of the fence and standing it up.]* Ho-ho, now she watch us snatch fiah wood.
>
> BIG SIS. You done said.
>
> BIG SUE. Lak all of ‘em—scrouging and a-gouging—Po’ white trash!
>
> — Paul Green, *The House of Connelly*

The above exchange between Big Sue and Big Sis, former slaves and current farm hands on the Connelly Plantation, sets the tone for their relationship with Patsy, the only white female farm hand in the play. Although the women are in similar economic straits, their racial differences hinder any potential for common ground. The tension between Big Sis, Big Sue, and the “white trash” Patsy represents a significant departure in race, gender, and class representation on the American stage. Although plays like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Dorothy and DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy and Bess* (1925), and Marc Connelly’s *The Green Pastures* (1929), address tensions

between whites and blacks in the South, these plays focus on either negative relationships between blacks and middle- to upper-class whites, or between blacks and whites in general. Additionally, these plays do not name poor whites as separate from other white people, and if white characters do appear in these plays, they are in positions of power.

Paul Green's use of the term "white trash" in the play *The House of Connelly* (1931) bears special significance; the play was written two years after the start of the Great Depression, when there were more poor whites than at any other time in American history. With formerly middle-class families standing in soup lines and living in "Hoovervilles,"[33] class lines within white culture were increasingly fluid, making the need for some whites to differentiate between themselves and white trash take on certain urgency. In the South, formerly wealthy landowners and their families were still trying to negotiate their place in a post-Civil War and Reconstruction society. White

[33] Named for President Herbert Hoover, Hoovervilles appeared at the outskirts of every American city by 1931 (Watkins 61). Groups of shelters made by the homeless out of scraps of wood and cardboard, they were an outward symbol of the Depression's effect on the country's morale.

trash worked the same in 1933 as it did in the antebellum South, by naming those who were lower than low.

Green's agenda in *The House of Connelly* was not to shame poor whites through derisive slang; instead he employs the term to question its usage. Patsy, the "white trash" that Big Sue and Big Sis refer to, is one of the hardest working tenants on the Connelly plantation and while Green leaves no racial group uncriticized, he does show Patsy as the most socially progressive character in the play. Although Green follows the tradition of the Carolina Playmakers' representations of noble poor white women, Green uses *The House of Connelly* to argue that even the most well-intentioned Southerners are unable to break free from the region's history.

The House of Connelly is Green's lamentation on class and race relations in the South. He does not promote one character's agenda as successful or correct, instead rejecting class and race positions across the board. By the end of the play it is clear that the future of the South relies on people of varying class and racial backgrounds working together; a future which is paralyzed by the inability of all classes to let go of pre-Civil War

southern culture. After a summary of *The House of Connelly*'s plot, this chapter analyzes the sexualization of both white and black poor women in the play, discusses the play's first production with the Group, and the larger implications of this production's treatment of poor women, specifically in regards to white trash stereotypes.

Southern Tensions, Gender, and Text

The House of Connelly chronicles life on a dilapidated post-Civil War plantation, and the play's tension springs from relationships among the white plantation family, white tenant farmers, and black tenant farmers, many of whom are former slaves. The women in each of these groups are critical to the play's action: aristocratic, snobbish spinster Connelly sisters, Gertrude and Evelyn, and their mother Mrs. Connelly; Big Sue and Big Sis, former slave women still working the plantation, mulatto daughters of long dead grandfather Connelly; and Patsy, the white tenant whose mastery of both farming and business far exceeds that of Will Connelly, the plantation's owner. All of these women hate each other, and though they all suffer from the plantation's financial decay, they view the others as

threats to their security, pinning their dreams on the hopelessly ineffective Will. As the play progresses, the frustration the women feel from their inability to control their own lives, as well as the plantation, manifests through increased animosity towards each other. The power of this animosity is evident in the beginning of the play, where class and race hatred overshadows the women's first meeting.

After Big Sis and Big Sue identify Patsy, "the new tenant gal," as white trash, she enters. Patsy is the daughter of the new head of farming on the plantation, whom Will Connelly, the owner, has hired in the hopes that he can improve the crop output. It becomes evident that Patsy is also quite skilled at farming, and works alongside her father. She bristles at the black women, who make fun of her, yet she gives in to their offer to tell her fortune. As they predict that "Death gwine take huh church-wedding bound," Will Connelly, who has been unsuccessfully hunting doves, enters (14). The two women react as if they have been caught doing something wrong. The stage directions read:

> *In a lightning flash the cunning of their nature has disappeared, and to the casual observer they are no other than two obsequious and ignorant old Negro women.* (15)

Throughout the play, Big Sis and Big Sue submit to white supremist treatment from the Connellys, while taking out their anger towards whites on Patsy. Similarly, Patsy bites her tongue when the Connelly sisters degrade her, and then uses her whiteness as power against Big Sue and Big Sis. Although the battles of class and position may show similar responses by Patsy, Big Sue, and Big Sis, the stage directions convey classic racism.

Will's entrance in this first scene restores Patsy's confidence in her power over the two black women, and they exit. Will and Patsy discuss hunting, and Will excuses his inability to shoot by saying that he is not really interested in killing doves. A flock flies overhead and Patsy grabs his gun, fires twice, bringing down two doves. Patsy's assertiveness and confidence in this scene counters Will's uncertainty. His inabilities in hunting echo his difficulties in running the plantation, but Patsy provides

him with a female ally who may be less judgmental than male peers.

The Connelly sisters, two middle-aged spinsters, contrast the energy and intensity of the poor women. Even their character descriptions seem lethargic:

> *Geraldine is tall and somewhat prim, with pallid aristocratic features; Evelyn is a few years younger and less austere.* (23)

Green's lack of enthusiasm for these characters is apparent, mirroring Geraldine and Evelyn's actions within the play's dialogue. While Big Sue, Big Sis, and Patsy spend their days working in the fields, Geraldine and Evelyn sit in their decrepit, disintegrating plantation house wishing for life as it was before the Civil War. Their conversations revolve around the glorious parties they used to host, and their ancestors' bravery on the battle field. They and their aging mother continually push Will to restore Connelly House to its former glory, hoping that he might marry into a wealthier plantation family.

In Act I, scene two, the Connellys sit down to an elegant Christmas dinner, pulling out the family's best dishes in an attempt to recreate sumptuous holiday dinners

of the past. In the 1931 production, the Connellys' dining room reflected the majesty of earlier generations, with high, columned walls, an elaborate fireplace, and enormous dining table placed in the center of the room. In this setting, the Connellys are dwarfed by the tangible structure representing their heritage. The tenant farmers, in their own Christmas tradition, come caroling to the plantation house with wild costumes and painted faces. They are marked here as separate from the Connellys, their entrance described in the stage directions, "*a group of singers come up under the portico, snarling and snapping in joyous abandon at Uncle Bob like a gang of dogs*" (41). Here the tenant farmers are not only economically beneath the Connellys, but, more than marked racially, they are marked as a different species, like uncontrollable animals. While the Connellys celebrate the holiday in an expansive dining room, the tenants crowd in the doorway, falling over each other in festive abandon.

Patsy, dressed like a gypsy, performs a high-spirited, seductive dance. Will and Uncle Bob, the two Connelly men present, cannot resist and join in the dance, although Will is nervous about dancing with Patsy in front of his mother

and sisters. Geraldine and Evelyn tolerate the dancing but remove themselves physically to the outskirts of the celebration.[34] This scene establishes Patsy's relationship with the Connellys as a sexual object. The Connelly men enjoy watching her dance and then dance with her, and by being the main focus of the dance she becomes the physical object of the celebration. The Connelly women established their criteria for respectable behavior during dinner with Will and Uncle Bob earlier in the scene, and by physically removing themselves from the celebration they comment on Patsy's status on the plantation.

The element of difference established in this scene is more complex than class or gender alone; the tension caused by the tenant farmers is related to ideas about whiteness and the ways that whites should behave, specifically through the attitudes of the Connelly women. Comparing the Connelly's sense of holiday tradition with the tenant farmers, there is no common ground; their cultural differences disrupt any racial cohesion. Patsy's dance also separates her from the Connelly women, further establishing the variations among white women on the plantation. This

[34] Mrs. Connelly, not feeling well, has already gone to bed.

holiday scene marks whiteness as a racial characteristic that does not elide class boundaries; while the tenant farmers are allowed in the Connelly house, they are tolerated, but not welcomed by the Connelly women.

The role of the plantation mistress and daughter is to help maintain the public secret by appearing beautiful, cultured, and demure, a reflection of the wealthy white man's power over his domestic world. When Essie, the black cook, seduces Will, exchanging sex for the purchase of a necklace she admires in a catalogue, the Connelly women retaliate by firing her from her job. Instead of being shamed by the affair, Essie teases the Connellys with her necklace:

> GERALDINE: [*Sharply within*] We don't need you, Essie.
>
> ESSIE: [*Giggling.*] Reckon so. [*Turning back the way she came*] Well, goodbye, you all.
>
> MRS. CONNELLY: Goodbye, Essie.
>
> ESSIE: [*Playing with the ornament around her neck.*] Reckon you ain't seen what I got from Sears-Roebuck?
>
> MRS. CONNELLY: [*Calmly*] Go along, Essie.

UNCLE BOB: [*Thundering*] Get out o’ here you hussy.

Essie seems unaffected by the Connellys’ coldness, even finding it humorous. She has watched their behavior on the plantation for too long to be surprised by their double standards. She chooses instead to wield her body as a site of power, using Will’s sexual weaknesses to her advantage. She has already planned to leave the plantation with her boyfriend, a preacher who follows the revival circuit, and therefore has no need to keep her job.

Uncle Bob, who reacts most vehemently against Essie’s liaison with Will, has himself pursued the black and white tenant farm women relentlessly. Green uses Uncle Bob’s assumption that, as an upper class white man, he has a right to enjoy the bodies of the poor women on the plantation, contrasting the Old South with the developing modern South. The Connellys plan a party with the intention of sparking a romance between Will and a wealthy belle whose family has been friends with the Connellys for several generations. Uncle Bob tells Patsy that she is invited, and in the middle of the party he coerces her into the garden, then begins grabbing and fondling her:

PATSY: [*panting*] Let me a-loose!

UNCLE BOB: So you come a-walking in the dark—anh? Humhn-unhn—you’re soft as a kitten. [*she frees one hand and strikes him in the face.*] This is one of the old boys, honey! The Bull of the woods! (59-60)

Will bursts through the bushes, threatening Uncle Bob and pulling him off of Patsy. Uncle Bob reacts by laughing at Will, suggesting that he is not man enough to hurt him, much less “take” Patsy, believing that an upper class white man would only be interested in “taking” a poor woman, white or black. Will’s respect for Patsy’s ideas and his desire to have a relationship with her is lost on his uncle.

Uncle Bob again forces himself on Patsy in Act II, when she enters the plantation house looking for Will. Patsy refuses to tell him what she needs to talk to Will about, and he pushes himself on her:

UNCLE BOB: Come on tell your Uncle Robert [*He comes up to her and tries to put his arm around her*.]

PATSY: [*Stepping away from him.*] I've got to see him myself.

UNCLE BOB: [*Now bitterly and without a shadow of jocularity*.] I can still raise that arm to its purpose. Truth remains extant—the entelechy of the shell. Hah-hah. Eky ho anthropos ten physin apotetelesmenen.

PATSY: If you'd put your arms in the field with a hoe there'd be a lot more truth, whatever your words mean.

UNCLE BOB: I was saying how perfect is man, how like a god. Me the masterpiece of nature.[35] (92)

Here Uncle Bob shows his power over Patsy both physically and culturally. He reminds her that while she may resist his advances, like every other poor woman on the plantation, she ultimately has little say, as he warns of his ability to abuse and overpower her, "I can still raise that arm to its purpose." More threatening to Patsy's long term interests on the Connelly plantation is the cultural gap between her and the Connellys, which Uncle Bob makes evident through his use of Greek. It is not enough for him

[35] The actual translation is "Man has a nature that is complete."

to evoke his elite education through the dead language; he manipulates the Greek phrase to claim himself as a “masterpiece of nature,” implying Patsy’s inequality within his cultural milieu.

Patsy, for her part, rejects Uncle Bob’s claims of superiority. She is uninterested and unimpressed by his language skills, pointing to the impracticality of their use. No matter how many Greek phrases Uncle Bob knows, he cannot use them to work the land and improve the plantation’s financial situation. To her, Uncle Bob’s superiority is worthless, as her primary interest lies in the quality of the work she can do on the farm. While Uncle Bob is unable to see the value of Patsy’s work, and the need for changes on the plantation, Will is aware that the Connellys will lose their land if they cannot let go of the family’s past and move forward with the New South.

Will is invested in rejecting the Connellys’ aristocratic past in favor of a more egalitarian farming system. He and Patsy work together on re-energizing and re-organizing the farm, and through their meeting they develop a romantic relationship. Inspired by Patsy’s ideas for improving Connelly Plantation, Will commits to laboring

side by side with his tenants. Meeting with all the farm's workers, he promises new plows, livestock, and rations for everyone who works the land they are assigned, insisting "We're going to be real farmers. We got a lot of land broke but we're going to break a lot more and break it deep" (73). Will expects more work from his field hands, but is willing to provide more in exchange for their labor.

Despite the detailed plans Will has for the farm, his mother disapproves. She wants him to marry a wealthy debutante, whose family money would keep the plantation going, but Will is determined to fix their problems through his own work. Mrs. Connelly is skeptical:

> MRS. CONNELLY: Then, excuse me, Will. The plantation and everything will keep on going to pieces. What will the end be? You know—poverty—poverty—to the end.

Her fear, that the Connellys could lose everything, provokes her to attack Patsy's interest in helping Will with farming plans, saying "You don't know a thing about such women as she" (79). Will denies his mother's claims, but her attack weakens his resolve. He is unable to resist falling back on the indulgences of his male ancestors and,

just as the farm's new organizational system gets underway, Will stops working, disappearing for days at a time, visiting brothels and bars in town.

In Act Two, the dialogue suggests that Patsy is pregnant, and, although the characters never state this outright, Patsy pushes Will to protect her reputation by marrying her. Influenced by Mrs. Connelly's attack on Patsy, Will accuses her of trapping him:

> PATSY: I'm not begging you. I'm trying to reason with you. If you cared about the farm you'd understand.
>
> WILL: Yes, you love the place and not me.
>
> PATSY: I don't, but why shouldn't I? It's a sight more honest. The land never tricks you. Do your part and she'll do hers. But you — I did my part by you and what did you do? Tried to make a — whore out of me. (95)

Will refuses to talk to Patsy further, and she moves away from the farm. Will's failure to follow through on his commitment to the plantation shows his inability to understand the cultural changes in the South. On the one hand he wants to move toward a new vision of class, but on

the other hand rejecting the Old South is alarming to Will, as it means refusing the advantages of privilege once available to wealthy white landowners.

Will says he wants nothing to do with the aristocratic Connelly past, but has no alternate plan or ideas. He rants against the philandering of his father, uncles, and grandfather, claiming that, if the Connellys were to host a family dinner that included all of their local relations, more than half of the black field hands on the plantation would be joining them at the table. Will's tirade shocks his sisters, who insist that he is lying, and beg their mother to stop his accusations. Geraldine and Evelyn's reaction shows how deeply they live in a plantation fantasy world, wishing for a past that never existed. Their mother, who has been ill for quite a while, is exhausted by the argument and finally admits that Will is right, and that she has been aware of the Connelly men's sexual abuse of their black slaves and servants, but, as a woman, felt that she could not speak against their behavior.

The Connelly women hate their servants and field hands, both black and white, blaming these women for the sexually predatory behavior of the Connelly men, unable to

see how these men created this culture. Despite Mrs. Connelly's admission of the sexual exploitation of poor women on the plantation, she ultimately blames the women. The performance of the Connellys' double standard through theatrical representation reveals the public secret of miscegenation in the South. Following Michael Taussig's definition of the public secret, the family's maintenance of privilege relies on the women "knowing what not to know" (2), but that secret is defaced through performance. An audience can sense the ghosts of the women forced into submission by the Connelly men over the decades, as the frame of theatre works, as Rebecca Schneider argues, to "summon the ghosts, to bring them out of the shadows and into the scene where they always already exist, to make them apparent *as players*" (23 emphasis in original).

These ghosts become painfully visible as Will focuses on the death of Purvis, a field hand fathered by local judge General Connelly.[36] Purvis appeared in General Connelly's courtroom, where Uncle Bob launched a case against him, after which he was sentenced to the gallows by his own father. Purvis's crime is never disclosed, as Will

[36] General Connelly is also Will's father.

centers on his experience of sitting in the courtroom as a boy, watching his father, and knowing that General Connelly had also fathered Purvis. Will asks his family, “Why didn’t he strip himself and say ‘I am the guilty one, judge me’?” (104).

By bringing Purvis’s ghost onto the stage, Will traps his family in their own lies and illusions. Uncle Bob, unable to deny Will’s accusation, shoots himself. He is found by Duffy, a man that he had fathered with a servant. Duffy is distraught, not because of Uncle Bob’s death, but because of the possible repercussions it might hold for him:

> Mr. Bob, I ain’t to blame. Don’t let de Gre’t Moster hold it ag’in me. Many times I prayed sump’n bad happen to you ‘cause you holp hang po’ Purvis. Now he done answer me. I repents, I repents. White folks, help me, don’t let it be writ against me in dat gre’t Book! Muhcy, Muhcy! Pappy! (106).

Again the ghost of Purvis is brought to the stage, along with Duffy’s mother. Uncle Bob’s death reinforces the awareness of black mistresses in the Connelly family

history, where, following Schneider, “they always already exist” but are now made “apparent *as players.*” These ghosts crowd the stage, overwhelming the Connelly women, who must face Uncle Bob and General Connelly’s abuses. The power these invisible bodies have over the Connellys marks their presence as explicit, “a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege” (Schneider 2). Will’s sisters’ and mother’s denial of the Connelly men’s abuse of their servants, and his subsequent explosion of that denial, lays bare the lack of authority all women on the plantation hold over the Connelly men. The Connelly women, who have lived their lives feeling superior to poor black and white women, are shown here as just as, if not more, powerless as the women they scorn.

Green’s view of plantation aristocracy rejects the notion that upper class Southerners are equipped to move the South forward culturally, and *The House of Connelly* focuses on how illusions about their place in post-Civil War society ruin them culturally and financially. One of

the key ways that Green marks the Connellys as culturally mired in the past is through their inability to see Patsy as anything more than white trash. While Green's agenda may have included a re-evaluation of southern nostalgia, *The House of Connelly*'s strongest assertion lies in the strength of the working class as the South's salvation.

Stereotyping Race and Class

The House of Connelly is full of stereotypes of the post Civil War/Reconstruction South. The cast of characters includes wealthy whites so attached to the old south that they would rather let their lives, and homes, fall apart than accept change; superstitious former slaves who also distrust change, and long for the stability of the old south; and poor white women who are treated as no more than sexual objects by wealthy whites. The play also shows the working class as hardworking and industrious; a willingness to reward the strengths of this class is suggested as the only hope for the South's future. At the same time, traditional morality underscores the entire play, as the Patsy and Essie's sexuality damages their reputations, reinforcing Gertrude, Evelyn, and Mrs. Connelly's disdain

of poor women. In many ways, a binary terror regarding whiteness and white power is at the root of Green's play, unraveling the male/female, white/trash, and white/black binaries. It is unclear whether Green feels that panic or is exposing the panic of other whites.

The play's production history reveals much more to this script — its history is full of anxiety over the future of theatre, politics, and the left-wing, with race, gender, and regionalism punctuating this tension throughout. Unlike the plays written and produced by the Carolina Playmakers, whose ultimate agenda in relation to class, race, and gender is easily dissected, *The House of Connelly* is full of contradictions. First, it is impossible to say whether its representation of women is good or bad, in terms of both Green's original intentions and analysis from a contemporary cultural viewpoint. While this may make the play difficult to pin down, it also suggests that Green's characters, regardless of whether or not they are realistic, do reflect the social confusion of the post-Civil War/Reconstruction South.

The scattered views of the South expressed through each character mark *The House of Connelly* as a site of

historical rememberings that disrupt notions of a master narrative. Green's plot is more about highlighting the disruptions of memory, the lack of cohesiveness among the characters' perceptions, than about telling a linear story in which one event leads to another. Despite the play's chronological unfolding, it is caught in what Kathleen Stewart terms a "poetics of space-time" in which history becomes "a series of focal points remembered in images that have been lifted out of once-told stories" (*Space* 106). Stewart's ethnographic analysis focuses on oral narrative that "both back talks 'America' and becomes the site of its intensification in performance" (4). Her retellings of narratives from the mountains of West Virginia are not intended to arrive at a "true" story about that region, gleaned from the combined work of memory and documentation; instead, Stewart traces the ways that "a local cultural real emerges in a precise mimetic tracking of events and grows dense with cultural tensions and desires" (4).

Similarly, Green writes about the South and its history, but it is not imperative that any one character's view be "correct" for an audience or reader to understand the sense of rural life that Green intends. It is more

vital, in fact, to recognize that this version of southern culture sees, like Stewart, that “there is more to the ‘history’re-*membered* in the cultural poetics of ruins, *places*, arresting images, and *just talk* than any master narrative can tell us” (106, emphasis in original). The Connelly family maintains their prestige by remembering the plantation before the Civil War. Because the family’s “golden age” came before the current Connellys’ births, these memories are based on stories handed down from past generations. Uncle Bob, Geraldine, and Evelyn are especially drawn to reliving these memories, even though they know they are just stories, not necessarily truths. Although Green believes he is disrupting a master historical narrative, attempting to show an alternate view of the South, he never interrogates his own privilege, and ultimately fails to mask the power relations that benefit him and other middle-class white southerners.

Most of the play’s action takes the form of ramblings from the Connelly family about the glory of the Antebellum days, mutterings from Big Sue and Big Sis about superstitions and prophecies, pleadings from Patsy about the way things could be if Will let go of his patrician

heritage, lectures from Will to his family about how twisted their perceptions of reality are. Most conventional plays in the realist genre are based in dialogue and monologue, and the root of the problems on the Connelly plantation comes from too much talk, and actions which either never come, or come too late.

Patsy's insistence on a farming system that treats all tenants equally, regardless of race, signifies that, despite her portrayal as a sex object, she is the one character who understands the needs of the New South. As both a woman and as white trash[37], Patsy operates as an explicit body, with the social marking of her actions revealing Green's cultural agenda to audiences. Following Schneider, Patsy carries "the weight of historical social significances ascribed to bodily markings" (20) as she is ghosted by the social and economic tensions of Depression-era audiences, as well as cultural understandings of white poverty in the 1930s.

Patsy believes that wages should be based on the work a person does, not on that person's racial, gendered, or class identity. Her attitude about fair pay is in direct

[37] Big Sue and Big Sis consistently refer to Patsy as white trash.

opposition to that of southern white landowners after the Civil War. Although white planters theoretically contested the idea of white "wage slavery,"[38] they continued to employ poor whites at low wages. With poor whites and blacks working side by side for similar wages, a new culture emerged among whites and blacks living in similar material conditions. While poor whites were plentiful during the antebellum era, they could always separate themselves from blacks through the existence of slavery. Once poor whites and blacks worked similar jobs for similar wages, lines of difference began to disappear. Because of the historical place of blacks in the South, for many poor whites parallels in material conditions did not correspond with parallel racial status. Biracial similarities reinforced the promise of Reconstruction, unsettling a belief among whites *of all classes* that their race made them superior to blacks (Jones 53). While the material conditions of poor whites may have been similar to that of poor blacks, and the assumption of racial superiority may have been

[38] The notion of wage slavery was first directed at Northern industrialists employing workers at such low wages that they could neither improve nor escape their economic or cultural position. After the official end of slavery in the South, this term was used to describe labor conditions for both white and black sharecroppers and factory workers (Jones 53-57).

challenged by this reality, the practice of hierarchical racial stereotyping did not end.

For the Connelly women, living at an economic level drastically below their pre-Civil War status, the notion of equal status based on race alone operates as a particularly threatening binary terror. In addition, Patsy's explicit body foregrounds their tenuous hold on power and privilege. For these women, binary terrorism "impacts the body directly as it occurs in the fraught space between subject and object that demarcates one body from another" (Schneider 18-19). Because Patsy, as a white woman, does manual labor alongside men and former slaves in the fields, she challenges both the white/trash binary and the notion of white southern women as delicate belles. At the same time, men find her captivating, which unravels the Connelly women's perception of feminine allure. Patsy's presence suggests that, if some whites are living the same lifestyle as former slaves, the Connellys cannot support their claim to racial superiority. If racial superiority is no longer the primary distinction of cultural status, then class superiority must be used to separate them from both poor whites and blacks.

This need to differentiate status among whites points to the complexities of racial categorization, and the role that class plays in these distinctions. I am not suggesting that, because of these differences among whites, the poor whites and blacks in *The House of Connelly* share commonalities of class, and therefore are similar communities through their status as victims of upper-class white power. Both are at the mercy of the Connellys' economic whims, but the potential for whites to unite based solely on their skin color is always a factor in racial discrimination. Within categories of whiteness, however, it is important to examine class-based discrimination because, as John Hartigan argues, "attention to the differences between whites importantly reframes a singular focus on 'race' within a critical understanding of its conflations with class and locational distinctions" (279). Without this analysis *The House of Connelly* would simply be a love story laced with financial stress and racial tension, missing the ways that the Connellys' rejection of Patsy is connected to panic over white status.

While the Connellys' need to despise Patsy is completely class-based, it is important to look at their

class antagonism in relation to racism and gender. Notions of race are too complex to wholly isolate studies of whiteness without regards to other races and, as Hartigan states, “this attention might obscure the connections between whites and the operations of power and privilege that structure this society” (279). Additionally, looking at class and race without examining gender differences within those categories ignores the ways that women’s experiences of power and privilege may be connected to their sexuality.

Although the Connellys might hate poor whites and blacks equally, that hatred has underlying distinctions that ultimately reject blackness above all else. Within this disregard lies a particular rejection of black women. Part of the Connelly women’s nobility relies on upholding the public secret of the male Connellys’ attraction to their black servants and field hands, as well as the number of mulatto children they have fathered. While the Connelly women may be in denial, the black women on the plantation are all too aware of this history, which fuels their dislike of white women of all classes.

The play's first scene is a grim view of how poor whites and blacks relate to each other, and is additionally an indictment of poor women of both races. The stage directions describe Big Sue and Big Sis:

> *Two old sybil-like Negro women come in from the right, one carrying a hoe and the other a tow sack, and both chewing tobacco in their toothless jaws. They are huge creatures, sexual and fertile, with round moist roving eyes and jowled faces smooth and hairless as a baby's. The mark of ancient strength and procreation still remains in their protuberant breasts and bulging hips. Under old coats their broad shoulders and arms are muscled like men*. (7)

This animal-like description suggests that these women, while sexual, are neither respectable nor noble. They are the offspring of Grandfather Connelly's relationships with his female slaves, two of many fathered by him, his brother, Uncle Bob, and his son, General Connelly. Green saw Big Sue and Big Sis as symbols of the "degenerative effects of slavery," who are "vulgar, superstitious, cynical, distrustful of the Connellys; but they are more

incapable of change than the Connellys themselves" (Kenny 32). As the primary black characters in the play, however, they also they stand in for all women of their race.

Revealing the public secret of interracial sex in the South was in some ways a radical move on Green's part. While relationships between white men and black women had been tolerated for many years, by the 1880s a new movement of men denied the existence of interracial sex in the South. These men, termed New White Men, were sons of those who thrived financially and culturally before and during the Civil War. They framed black women as depraved seducers, therefore creating an excuse for any white man who may have fallen guilty of miscegenation (Gilmore 68-73). By the 1930s, the South's legacy of lynching often transferred this sexual force to black men, whose hanging was often defended as protecting white women from rape. In *The House of Connelly* Green challenges the myth of the New White Men, blaming white men for the South's history of miscegenation. At the same time he conflates black women and sexuality, and particularly a perverse, secretive sexuality rooted in racial and class-based power. This contradiction reveals the pervasiveness of the myth created

by the New White Men in Southern culture, and suggests the difficulty Green experienced trying to write simultaneously for both white and black characters.

Green's use of Big Sue and Big Sis does much more than symbolize the "degenerative effects of slavery," or represent a general image of black women. The extreme physicality of these characters in the plantation environment reflects the white characters' stiffness and obsession with hierarchy. Robert Cantwell refers to this kind of use of black stereotype as

> . . . the agitation and confusion in which the stereotype completes itself, spreading metonymically in the mobilized imagination, along arteries of jealousy and fear toward lurid sexual and animal fantasies and other apparitions, from which we can protect ourselves only by coupling that vision to ourselves metaphorically and laughing at the clown that results: one who isn't as intelligent or as educated or as articulate as 'we' are, who isn't as affluent or ambitious, as cultivated, as tastefully dressed, as dignified . . . (178)

Using Cantwell's view of the black stereotype, Big Sue and Big Sis can be seen as markers of white civility. Like the myth of black sexuality created by the New White Men, the physicality of Big Sue and Big Sis places them in opposition to an assumed white feminine morality. As written by Green, these women can be wild and animalistic because they are black, suggesting that whites can only behave in these ways when they are either mocking blacks or rejecting whiteness. A similar objectification occurs within categories of whiteness.

Patsy, the play's heroine, is described in Green's stage directions as "*a lithe full-figured girl of twenty or more, with cheeks pink in the cold and dark gipsy-like eyes—eyes which at times have a bright hard look*" (12). Like Big Sue and Big Sis, her body is seen as supple and sexual. While the two black women are seen as animalistic and masculine, Patsy's femininity is countered by "dark gipsy-like eyes" that "have a bright hard look." Her eyes visibly mark her as "other" than the white Connelly women, through both their color and the way she expresses herself with them. Additionally, describing Patsy's eyes as "gipsy-like" indicates that, although she is white, she might

belong in another racial category. It is unclear what Green means by a “bright hard look,” but the description counters the decorum of shy debutante considered attractive in southern ladies.

The sexuality of the poor women in *The House of Connelly* is treated by all characters as natural, a given for women of their class. This notion corresponds with the ways that gender, class, and sexuality were debated in North Carolina while Green was growing up. While the New White Men blamed interracial sex on the seductions of black women, poor white women and their pursuit of black men became the focus of arguments against interracial sex from some members of the black community. Alexander Manly, editor of the *Daily Record*, the only black newspaper in North Carolina, wrote a scathing editorial in August of 1898 in response to a speech given the year before by white supremacist Rebecca Latimer Felton. Felton had blamed white farmers for the poverty experienced by poor white women in the rural South, accusing them of ignoring the rape of white women by black men to the point that lynching was the only solution (Gilmore 105). Manly’s editorial claimed that poor white men did not properly protect or control their

women, therefore increasing the likelihood that poor white women would either be raped (by both white and black men), or that they would initiate sexual relationships with black men. Manly also argued that over half of the reported rapes of white women by black men were cases of consensual sex which only became criminal cases after the relationship was discovered (Gilmore 106-107).

At issue here is not the accuracy of Manly's editorial, which I am sure contains some truth. What is critical is the way that poor white women (and their inattentive men) are framed as the root of the interracial sex problem in the South. The terror that Manly evokes challenges the most critical element of the white/black, white/trash binaries in the Victorian South; to suggest that white women might actively pursue sexual relations with any man was unheard of, but the idea that a white woman could willingly consent to sex with a black man transformed the suggestion into an obscenity, or binary terror. The outrage over Manly's editorial is linked to, following Rebecca Schneider, an "overt manipulation of the gendered/colored/classed body against dominant codes delimiting those bodies" which "raises the issue of the

social regulation of the appropriate and the inappropriate" (17). Manly's open use of the poor white female body against that of the black male body not only questions the social regulations that say black men must be lynched, but also the unspoken codes which deny a white woman's attraction to those same men.

Manly is careful not to make his argument against white women in general, but to draw lines specific to class. Given the risks of writing and publishing such an editorial, Manly must have felt that a focus on poor white women might safely dispute Felton's claims against black men. What he did not prepare for was the alignment of whites across class lines in protection of "Christian womanhood." Immediate response to his editorial came from white newspapers, which reprinted parts of Manly's argument alongside editorials admonishing his claims. Manly's life was threatened a few months later in a race riot on November 10, 1898, after the white supremacy-oriented Democrats won the local elections. Manly escaped North Carolina, but the offices of the *Daily Record* were destroyed. While these events and ideas occurred before Green came of age, they saturated attitudes about race,

gender, and class in early twentieth century North Carolina. Their influence can be seen in the ways that Green, a liberal anti-segregation writer, used his plays to fight racism; he rejected claims of white supremacy, but could not escape the ways that stereotypes of gender and sexuality permeated his environment.

Green, the Group, and White Liberal Politics

In the early 1930s, Paul Green's plays were laying the foundation for a permanent and secure position in the American theatre: he had already published two collections of plays, which were being produced throughout the country; he became the editor of *The Reviewer*[39] in 1925; and in 1927 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his play, *In Abraham's Bosom.*[40] The most theatrically successful member of the Carolina Playmakers, Green's work is a direct example of how the ideas about poor southerners generated by that group became part of a national dialogue. A playwright and

[39] A literary magazine that published only the work of southern writers. It survived only four issues under Green's editorship due to problems with financial backing—the only backing Green could get required him to move to New York City, which he would not do (Avery xviii).

philosophy professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Green was dedicated to the development of the new South. As an undergraduate he majored in philosophy (theatre was not an available major at the time) while working with the Playmakers, and after completing his bachelors degree Green did graduate work in philosophy and continued to write plays.

As a member of the Playmakers, Green became known for his treatment of rural poverty in the South, particularly through his "negro"[41] and tenant farm plays. Frederick Koch identified Green as a leading creator in the development of "negro" drama, whose initial plays were not produced because ". . . the time was not ripe, although North Carolina was a leader among the Southern states in Negro education and in friendly race relationships" (*Carolina Folk-plays* xv). In the years following the publication of Green's first "negro" plays, UNC Chapel Hill began sponsoring inter-collegiate and inter-high school dramatic tournaments among African-American schools in North

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[40] Produced by the Provincetown Players, at the Provincetown Playhouse, 1926.

[41] Negro drama is vaguely defined by Koch as plays written about the everyday lives of blacks. Overwhelmingly written by white liberals, negro drama aimed to theatricalize arguments for social progress.

Carolina. This is not to say that segregated dramatic tournaments are signs that Jim Crow sentiments did not exist in North Carolina, or at UNC Chapel Hill. Koch and others involved with the Playmakers contended, however, that this was more than any other southern state was attempting in hopes of improving race relations.

Green's upbringing on a farm, and his subsequent work in the fields, made him feel particularly able to write plays about rural African-Americans. As he saw it, "No doubt, through the long summer days of working with Negro field hands, living in and out of their cabins as it were, wrastling, playing, fighting with them, I developed some fellow feeling for people who have to bear the brunt of things" (quoted in Gassner, x). Vincent Kenny, one of Green's colleagues at UNC Chapel Hill, writes of Green's work on plays for African-American actors and theatres that he had "no assumed pose of a do-gooder," but was merely responding to Koch's instruction to "write about what he knew" (39).

Green's skill at accurately writing black characters was recognized by writers Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, both of whom worked with Green on plays. Hurston

and Green collaborated on, but never completed, the play "John de Conqueror." Green and Wright worked together on the dramatization of Wright's novel *Native Son*. Wright wrote to Green, "It may surprise you to know that I had to resign my job as publicity director of the Federal Negro Theatre in Chicago a few years ago because I fought for a production of your 'Hymn to the Rising Sun.' Indeed, I had to fight both Negroes and whites to get them to see that the play was authentic."[42] A member of the Harlem Renaissance, Wright believed in the power of folk characters to create authentic images of black culture. Green's plays, almost without exception, focus entirely on either poor southern whites or poor southern blacks. For the most part the two races do not interact in these plays, and upper-class whites are practically non-existent.

The House of Connelly stands apart from this pattern. Green mixes white and black characters, and infuses the play with tensions between wealthy whites and poor characters of both races. His view of the future of race and class relations in the South in this play reveals a

[42] Richard Wright to Paul Green, May 22, 1940. *Hymn to the Rising Sun* (1936) is one of the plays written by Green about the lives of blacks in the South.

malaise, as he exposes the strengths and weaknesses of each character, all of whom (with the exception of Patsy) seem caught up in upholding the established social binaries of the antebellum South. Although the first production of *The House of Connelly* threw Green into national dialogue with some of the most well-known theatrical revolutionaries of the 1930s and 1940s, his name and this play have faded, and are entirely absent from most histories of American theatre.

The Theatre Guild in New York bought the rights to *The House of Connelly* in 1928, but never produced the play. Some of the younger members of the Guild were starting to talk of doing work separate from, but under the auspices of, the Guild, and Green's play seemed to fit their needs, as it was by an American author and dealt with serious social content. In 1931, *The House of Connelly* was the first production mounted by the Group Theatre. Co-directed by Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford, the rights to the play, along with $1000 and postponed contract obligations for Franchot Tone and Morris Carnovsky were donated to the Group by the Theatre Guild.

The Group began their work by traveling for the summer of 1931 to a farmhouse in Brookfield, Connecticut, centering their attention on Green's play and Strasberg's development of the acting Method.[43] The Group was idealistic, young,[44] and they bonded through the belief that theatre was too caught up in the star system; uninterested in the issues of real life; obsessed with crass hit or flop commercialism; and that the art of acting was too artificial and fabricated. The forty theatre artists who ventured to Connecticut to experiment with play development at the height of the Depression did so with a passion for art over money—the only pay provided that summer was room and board. This financial sacrifice paid off artistically; by the end of *The House of Connelly's* first run on Broadway, the Group was hailed as a success, and the production, received enthusiastically by audiences and critics, was acknowledged as a new step in the development of American theatre.[45] Brooks Atkinson wrote, "Between Mr.

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[43] The Method, briefly defined, is based on the work of Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavsky, and teaches that actors can reveal subtleties hidden in the text by believing the imaginary world of the play and connecting with the emotional life of their character based on personal experience and observation of real life.

[44] The average age of Group members was twenty-seven.

[45] The Group cast: Will Connelly (Franchot Tone), Patsy (Margaret Barker), Big Sue (Rose McClendon), Big Sis (Fanny de Knight), Uncle Bob

Green's prose poem and the Group Theatre's performance it is not too much to hope that something fine and true has been started in the American theatre" (qtd. In Williams 59). Paul Green was heralded as a playwright second only to Eugene O'Neill (Kenny 27). *The House of Connelly* toured in 1932, performing in Boston, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia, and was revived by the Federal Theatre Project in 1937.

In Harold Clurman's *The Fervent Years* (1945), he describes *The House of Connelly* as a "basic struggle between any old and new order," with connections to Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. Although Clurman makes the connection between Green and Chekhov's work, he believes that such study of the play would be "academic, empty, and useless" (40). Clurman suggests that, although the Group actors were interested in the social implications of the script, ultimately their interest in the text gave way to the actors' far greater absorption in it as a vehicle for the strengthening of their craft" (40). This attention to

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(Morris Carnovsky), Geraldine Connelly (Stella Adler), Evelyn Connelly (Eunice Stoddard), Mrs. Connelly (Mary Morris), Essie (Ruth Nelson), Virginia Buchanan (Dorothy Patton). Additional cast members of note: Phoebe Brand, Clifford Odetts, Friendly Ford, Art Smith, Herbert Ratner, Paula Miller, Lewis Leverett, Virginia Farmer, Walter Coy, William Challee, J. Edward Bromberg.

acting over text was also evident among the Group's three directors. Clurman reports that, although Crawford's theatrical background was the best match for the direction of the play, Clurman and Strasberg felt the development of the company's acting technique was more important; Strasberg was designated the play's director (41).

The version of the script performed by the Group was published in 1931, and ends on a happy note. Will and Patsy marry, infuriating the Connelly sisters who run off to live with relatives. Will is sad that his sisters are gone, but sees that the only future lies in working the land with Patsy. Patsy has convinced Will that the tenant farmers should be treated more as equals working together with him to improve the plantation. Big Sue and Big Sis resist the marriage, but are chastised by Will, who informs them that Patsy is the mistress of the house now, reinforcing the social binary of white/black. Will and Patsy embrace, hopeful for a future where class biases are thrown away, and men and women work side by side toward a common goal. Will has let go of his family's history and expectations saying, "let the past die. It's our life now — our house!" (119). The suggestion here is that bitter class divisions

can be reconciled, and that the answer to economic crisis lies in people of all backgrounds working together equally. This ending also highlights the class mobility available to whites that other races could not access in the 1930s. Despite Patsy's upbringing as a tenant farmer, love and determination have made her the mistress of a large plantation in a relatively short period of time.

In addition to general economic issues, this ending also suggests the possibility that the lives of tenants and sharecroppers could improve. Poor families farming on a portion of someone else's land were forced to use every able-bodied member of the family, male and female. As a result, household industry (sewing, canning, etc.) that would keep these families from needing store-bought items was almost non-existent. Additionally, annual contracts prohibited these families from keeping personal vegetable gardens or livestock, further ensuring their abject poverty (Jones 68). Although a New York audience might miss the regional meaning of Patsy's plans for the plantation, Green's youth on a southern farm would have made him particularly aware of these problems. Regardless of the subtle details of this ending's message, the general point,

that classes must work together, is unmistakable. Nonetheless, this suggested cooperation is limited to the white characters, as Big Sue and Big Sis continue to be trapped as servants to a white mistress.

The 1963 published version of *The House of Connelly* in the volume *Paul Green: Five Plays of the South,* edited by John Gassner, adds a twist to the play's ending. In this version, Will and Patsy still marry, and the Connelly sisters still run off to live with relatives. Will follows after his sisters, however, hoping to convince them to return. While he is gone, Big Sue and Big Sis kill Patsy, strangling her with a burlap sack. This murder is staged in front of the audience, emphasizing the chilling effect of its violence. In this ending, there is no hope of class reconciliation, or of men and women standing side by side, equally working for the good of the farm. Although Big Sue and Big Sis still oppose change, they are not passive spectators. Their killing of Patsy, while brutal, eliminates the message of white power and privilege that supersedes class divisions. Patsy's murder, however, supports the notion of African Americans as brutal savages, as suggested by Green's character description of Big Sue

and Big Sis. Additionally, this ending can be read as a didactic moment illustrating the need for white control over the unruly black servants.

In Gassner's preface to *The House of Connelly* there is no mention of the happy ending published in 1931. Clurman and Crawford do discuss the two endings in their memoirs though. The tragic ending to the play was the original one Green had written, even though it was published years later. It was not Green who initiated a different finale though, but members of the Group. Clurman states that the Group found the murder of Patsy:

> . . . historically and humanely untrue, and in conflict with what we felt to be the theme of the play. The vacillating hero, a scion of the old South, had to be given his chance to redeem his land and his life with the aid of the tenant girl, who loved him. The resistance of the black servants was something that had to be overcome through Patsy's firmness. . . (48)

This statement suggests an argument for white supremacy and the infantilization of African Americans, although Clurman never directly addresses the issue of race in his memoir.

According to Clurman, The Group's belief in the "perfectibility of man," made them uncomfortable with the play's brutal ending, and they desired a more hopeful finale to their first production (48). This also reveals more of Clurman's racial and class politics, as it suggests that Patsy's whiteness makes it possible for her to become an aristocrat. Clurman states that the change to a happy ending was motivated by The Group's interest in focusing on Will's ability to overcome strife, and that this argument eventually roused Green to agree wholeheartedly that a positive end was essential.

Crawford tells a different story in her memoir, insisting that what frustrated the Group had less to do with the strength of the individual man, Will, and more to do with the future of the South. Crawford was responsible for asking the Guild to allow the Group to produce the play, and was provided with two drafts of the play—one over two hundred pages and the other under one hundred. Her job was to try and mesh both versions into a workable script. Crawford terms it a "very American play about the post-Civil War adjustments facing plantation owners, their freed slaves and the 'white trash'" (53). Unlike Clurman, she

sees the struggles of the black and poor white characters as equal to the Connellys in importance. Crawford also understands the importance of the script's regional focus. Where Clurman views the key figure in *The House of Connelly* as Will, the "vacillating hero," Crawford identifies Patsy as a symbol of the new South. In her interpretation, murdering Patsy is akin to damning the hopes of the entire region (55). Crawford reports that, by arguing the importance of giving hope to the South's future, Green was convinced, reluctantly, to write the new ending. It is possible that Crawford, determined to get a happier ending out of Green, played on his allegiance to the South, as opposed to having any vested interest in the region herself.

Clurman and Crawford's stories about the Group's first summer, aside from different ideas about *The House of Connelly's* changed ending, are strikingly similar on one particular issue: in all of their discussion of the living environment on the Connecticut farm, there is no mention of the African American actors and their social interactions with the white members of the Group. Rose McClendon and Georgette Harvey, who played Big Sue and Big Sis, did not

rehearse with the Stanislavsky method that Lee Strasberg interpreted for the other actors as, according to Crawford, “they would have turned white” (54). Crawford does not specify what she means here other than that McClendon and Harvey were “experienced professionals,” perhaps suggesting that they would not have been open to the way Strasberg worked with actors. Instead, Crawford directed McClendon and Harvey’s scenes. Perhaps an element of racism kept these actresses segregated from the other cast members, or Strasberg specifically had difficulty working with them. It is also possible that both issues played a part in the decision, and Crawford was chosen to work with them based on her history with one of the actresses. McClendon had worked with Crawford in *Porgy and Bess*, and had also performed on Broadway in Green’s *In Abraham’s Bosom.* According to Clurman, Crawford almost quit the production because she felt underused; she was “more of an appendage to the production than Strasberg’s colleague” (51). Clurman convinced her to stay on, but it is unclear if she stayed because she was viewed as Strasberg’s equal, or because no one else had a working relationship with McClendon and Harvey. Despite Crawford’s relationship with these

actresses, Harvey did not open with the show in New York, replaced by Fanny de Knight[46].

Clurman and Crawford also leave out another important production change made by the Group. The character of Essie was played by white actress Ruth Nelson in their production; not in black-face, but as another member of the poor white community. This choice may have been based in the desire to use committed members of the Group before bringing in outside actors, but the effect to the script's meaning is significant. Essie's presence as a black woman connects Big Sue and Big Sis to a larger community, even though the three characters do not interact.

The power of Essie's binary terrorism against the Connelly women is lost, as their only difference is their class. Her relationship with Will also has less historical meaning, given the sexual use of slave women by his ancestors. Although the character still flaunts the influence of her body over Will, as a white woman her display does nothing to explode the public secret of miscegenation on the plantation. By presenting Will's second sexual partner on the plantation as another white

[46] There is no published explanation for Harvey's absence.

woman, the meaning of his inter-racial liaisons is lost, and his commitment to Patsy is placed in relation to a more general desire for "white trash." In short, this directorial choice reinforces the representation of poor white women as sexually available, as opposed to highlighting the power of a wealthy white man over women of all races who work for him. Both published versions of the play describe Essie as a black woman, but none of the memoirs connected to this first production mention this important casting change.

When the Group returned to New York in the fall of 1931, they performed a run-through for the Guild board. According to Crawford, although the board was impressed with the performances, they were appalled at the changed ending, and only agreed to provide five thousand dollars as backing—only half of what they had initially agreed to. Interestingly, she does not specify why the board disliked the new ending. The rest of the production's funding was put up by Eugene O'Neill and an unnamed executive at Samuel French[47] (Crawford 55). Crawford's telling of *The House of Connelly*'s first production is compelling, not just because

[47] Samuel French was Green's literary agency.

of the friction around artistic choices, but also because the economic climate of the Depression made production choices take on new artistic importance; if a changed ending resulted in the loss of five thousand dollars, the Group had better be convinced that it was the right change. Unfortunately, Crawford does not discuss the Group's conflict with the Guild board of directors over the play's ending. Combined with the lack of detail surrounding her and Clurman's retellings of their disagreement about the ending with Green, this adds to the mystery of *The House of Connelly*'s conclusion.

The Letters of Paul Green, edited by Laurence Avery and published in 1994, does not provide any additional clues during the time of the plays rehearsal and production to indicate who was right about the specific argument for the changed ending, Crawford or Clurman. While the letters Green wrote to his wife, friends, and colleagues were catalogued in detail starting in 1916, the summer of 1931 is conspicuously absent. From May to September, there is not one letter published. Green wrote almost daily to his wife Elizabeth, so it is odd that, while he worked with the

Group in Connecticut, not one letter seemed worthy of appearing in Avery's volume.

The only mention of the changed ending in Green's published correspondence comes in a 1953 letter to John Gassner. Gassner only knew of the 1931 version of the script used by the Group,[48] but during a visit to Green's outdoor historical drama *The Lost Colony*[49], was told by Samuel Selden[50] that Green preferred his original, unpublished ending. Gassner wrote Green requesting a copy of the original script, and Green promised to look for and send it to him, saying "It was a tragic conclusion and cued out of—well, and art intuition rather than a life recollection" (Avery 534). Green located a copy of the original script at the University of Iowa, where the first production of the play with the tragic ending was produced in 1939. After reading this version of *The House of Connelly*, Gassner insists on publishing the tragic finale, believing that, "In a sound professional theatre, *Connelly* (with the *original* ending) and *Desire Under the Elms* would

[48] Avery termed this the "comic" ending (534).
[49] *The Lost Colony,* produced in 1937 in Roanoke, North Carolina, chronicles the story of the Jamestown Settlers of 1587.
[50] Original director of *The Lost Colony* and colleague of Green's in the Theatre Department at UNC Chapel Hill.

be in repertory year in and year out" (535)[51]. It is not clear in Green's correspondence with Gassner what he himself thought about the two endings. Vincent Kenny, a colleague of Green's at UNC Chapel Hill, wrote a 1971 analysis of Green's work insisting that Green ". . . was vexed by the three directors[52] . . . [and] felt that their ignorance of the South, of farming, and of raw passions stylized the play and forced an ending not consistent with the logic of the action" (26). The source for Kenny's argument is unclear, and he writes as if this explanation comes directly from Green.

In 1975, yet another interpretation of the changed ending emerged.[53] Crawford contacted Paul Green to see what memories he had of the summer of 1931. Crawford was at that time working on her memoir, *One Naked Individual* (1977), and hoped that Green might be able to add to her discussion of *The House of Connelly* and the Group's first summer. Green's memory of the rehearsals and development of *The*

[51] From Gassner to Green, July 8, 1954.
[52] Crawford, Clurman, and Strasberg. Kenny refers here to the directors of the Group, not of the play.
[53] Although written in 1975, this correspondence was not published until 1994.

House of Connelly is the first published discussion of the play in relation to the Group's political interests.

In his letter to Crawford, Green focuses on how the political ideology of the Group members shaped his experience and interpretation of the company's artistic motivations:

> At the time—as I found out later—the young Group members were taken with the communist ideology and knew more about and felt closer to Joseph Stalin than, say, they did to our own Thomas Jefferson. This riled the heck out of me. I had a number of arguments. I remember a beautiful-eyed choreography member looked at me blazingly one day and said that in the revolution of the proletariat that was coming in America before long she would take great delight in cutting my throat. And another member shivering with delight of dedication one day said that heads were going to roll in America and Paul Green's would be one of the first to be bounced along the rocky earth by avenging hands. (Avery 680)

Green, after communicating the politically-inspired death threats, says, ". . .it was out of this fervor of conviction, I guess, that a decision was made to change the ending of the *Connelly* play to—in Clurman's words—to a yea-saying statement instead of a nay-saying one" (680)[54]. Here then is another explanation for the changed ending, many years after the fact, which seems to have more to do with liberal politics than representations of the South, although Crawford suggested the latter in her published memoir.

That each person involved in the first production of *The House of Connelly* offers a different rationalization for the changed ending speaks to the difficulties of collaborative theatrical work, as well as to the nuances of memory. Such varied differences of opinion on this particular ending also indicates that the combined issues of class, women, and race in the South were so loaded in the early 1930s that Crawford, Clurman, and Strasberg could not agree on the best way to negotiate the play's final

[54] Despite the anti-communist bent to this letter, Green believed, at least in the 1930s, in the rights of all political parties to express their beliefs. In February of 1931 he wrote a letter to the Mayor of Memphis, protesting the imprisonment of his friend Henry Fuller, who was jailed in that city for asking about local communist party activities.

scene, and ultimately decided to replace the original ending instead of addressing the complexities of Patsy's murder. Also, the ending used in *The House of Connelly's* first production did serve to argue for class equality, an argument impossible with original ending, and therefore reinforces the political views of the Group.

The Group's production of *The House of Connelly* raises questions about regional issues on a national stage, and highlights a resistance to addressing the complications of gender and race. It is possible that the Group did not understand the play that Green intended. Their changes in action and casting might make the play more universal than regional, but these changes also shift the core meaning of the play. Big Sue, Big Sis, and Essie have the potential to create binary terror by unraveling notions of black power and control. While none of these women ultimately has command over the white characters, they are able to wield their bodies as sites of power, undermining the expectations and beliefs of the Connellys. The Group, in an effort to push a hopeful agenda in the play, positioned Big Sue and Big Sis as powerless and insignificant pawns of white supremacy by changing their role in the play's ending

from one of force to one of submission. The casting change of Essie from black to white asserts an image of poor white women as collectively promiscuous and readily available to white men in power. Both of these choices restrict images of poor women already limited in the play. Like the tenant farm plays of the Carolina Playmakers, the only hope for these women is to assimilate to middle and upper class white culture.

The House of Connelly set the stage on Broadway for the representation of poor southern whites, but the next play to address this subject in New York took a drastically different approach. Green and the Group gave audiences a view of class and race discords that ultimately avoided presenting any one group as the root of problems in the South. Jack Kirkland's production of *Tobacco Road*, however, focused solely on poor whites, offering sexual miscreants, petty thieves, and comical idiots. Audiences reveled in this opportunity to watch these "southerners" make fools of themselves.

Negotiating Gender and Class on *Tobacco Road*

> *Ellie May and I had a lot in common. She loved life, which treated her so badly in the play, and I adored the theatre, which till now had always kicked me in the pants.*
>
> —Ruth Hunter, member of *Tobacco Road's* original Broadway cast

Actress Ruth Hunter's memoir, *Come Back on Tuesday . . .* (1945), chronicles the daily humiliations she faced trying to make a living as an actress in late 1920s through early 1930s New York City. She describes male directors and producers pawing at her body; threadbare clothes, shoes, and undergarments; and rejections from directors who cast prettier women, regardless of the character type. Despite these frustrations, Hunter loved theatre too much to give it up. When the Great Depression hit, she admits to seeing little difference in her personal economic situation, as she had already been "depressed" for so long.

Hunter's memoir, along with her 1965 follow-up *Barefoot Girl on Broadway*, provides a vivid account of what women endured to make careers in the theatre during the Depression, and more specifically, offers details about the rehearsal and production period of *Tobacco Road*. Hunter was

sympathetic to the play's characters, poor sharecroppers in the rural South, and believed that the production had the ability to make audiences think differently about that class and region. Her sympathy suggests that, like the folk writers of the Carolina Playmakers, she believed that an "authentic" but unreal rural white southerner could represent an entire class and region. Over the five years she played the part of Ellie May, however, some characters had gone through several casting changes and Hunter felt that the new actors did not care about the play's message as much as they cared about getting laughs from the audience. Describing her decision to leave the production, Hunter says, "Going into its sixth year, it wasn't the play we started with, not the same *Tobacco Road* at all" (*Barefoot* 113).

Playwright Jack Kirkland viewed *Tobacco Road* as documentary, and, like Hunter, many of the actors took the plight of the southern tenant farmer seriously. Nevertheless, from a contemporary lens the characters seem to be degrading stereotypes and the plot constructed to maximize the subjugation of poor women. This play and its production, however, are much more complicated than the

script alone suggests; there is some accuracy to the situations represented in *Tobacco Road*, but they were exaggerated to the point of farce, and then marketed as cultural documentation.

I cannot approach *Tobacco Road* in the same way as the other plays in this study; while *Peggy, Fixin's* and *The House of Connelly* each provide moments of women's strength and control over their own lives, *Tobacco Road* presents none — neither through the characters in this play, nor the analysis of them by critics and scholars. What *Tobacco Road* does offer is a disturbing, and unabashedly commercial picture of what was accepted on Broadway as appropriate representations of lower class white women. In addition to the play's Broadway success, it played to sold-out audiences in Chicago and Los Angeles, had four touring productions, and was made into a movie in 1941.[55] In each incarnation, audiences were assured that they were seeing an realistic depiction of the rural South.

Adapted for the stage by Jack Kirkland from Erskine Caldwell's best-selling novel of the same name (1932),

[55] A legal ban of the play was instituted by Chicago's mayor after a successful run of performances in that city, due to its sexual explicitness (Arnold 12).

Tobacco Road created degenerate icons out of the book's stereotypes. Still the most well known theatrical representation of poor, southern, rural whites, *Tobacco Road* embedded the white trash stereotype in American popular culture. This chapter will discuss the play's representation of women as ignorant, lazy degenerates; the treatment of female characters and the actresses who played them in the original Broadway production; and the harsh criticism of the play by theatre critics, journalists, and southern public intellectuals. I will track the ways that notions of defacement and public secrets are intertwined with moments of binary terror and white/trash/women, arguing that these elements, combined with *Tobacco Road*'s popularity, permanently affected popular culture views of white trash.

Tobacco Road represents the pinnacle of the theatrical development of "white trash" characters in the 1920s and 1930s. Caldwell and Kirkland's play stands in direct contrast to the hard working poor whites presented by the Carolina Playmakers, and its storyline is meaner, dirtier, and more depressing than *The House of Connelly*. Because of these stark differences, the staging of "white trash" in

Tobacco Road has a more profound and lasting effect on images of whiteness than the other plays I discuss. *Peggy, Fixin's,* and *The House of Connelly* attempt to show certain traits, like hard work, as noble virtues that advocate sympathy for poor whites. *Tobacco Road*, however, works to create a division within categories of whiteness by what John Hartigan identifies as "inscribing an insistence on complete social distance from problematic white bodies . . . who disrupted the social decorums that have supported the hegemonic, unmarked status of whiteness as a normative identity" ("Unpopular" 317). As Hartigan argues "white trash" has historically been used in the maintenance of white privilege by identifying the boundaries of what whites could and could not be.

On the one hand, the raw image of white trash humiliation via theatrical performance could be argued as the ultimate defacement of Depression-era Broadway snobbery. The poverty facing millions of white Americans could not be reconciled with the cultural ideas of white privilege, and, therefore, it became more important than ever to separate the notion of white trash from that of whiteness in general. By revealing southern white trash to

well-heeled New York theatre-goers framed by a prestigious stage, a rural public secret explodes as representative of the lives of less fortunate Americans. On the other hand, the stage version of *Tobacco Road* only teases the mystery is was rumored to expose, while concealing the allegation that Caldwell's novel unfolds. The play implies that southern white trash are poor, hungry, and miserable because of their own weaknesses. The novel, however, goes to great lengths to blame the wealthy white southern landowners for the poverty experienced by sharecroppers. Perhaps Kirkland sensed that New York audiences would be uncomfortable with Caldwell's literary revelation that wealthy whites are at the root of economic and social problems in the South.

What separates the poor whites in *Tobacco Road* from characters in the other plays I study here is their unwillingness to work toward middle-class white behavior and lifestyle. Unlike the overworked families in *Peggy* and *Fixins'*, the Lester family's destitution is the direct result of their laziness and immorality. *The House of Connelly* shows tenant farmers with a stronger work ethic than the plantation family, and who also were more capable

of successfully running the business end of farming. And while Peggy, Lily, and Patsy were treated as sexual objects, they each ultimately proved to be hard-working, virtuous women.

Tobacco Road offers the polar opposite representation of poor white southern women. Four of the five women are currently or have been sexually promiscuous, and the fifth, thirteen-year-old Pearl, is a vigorously pursued sexual conquest. In this sense, the play enjoys teasing out base notions of poor women and sex, the latter of which, following Taussig, is “the secret we are henceforth doomed to always speak about precisely because it is a secret” (5). Audiences could revel in the titillating exploits of the Lester women, perhaps even wish that they were participating in these exploits, but sit at, following Hartigan, a “complete social distance” from these “problematic white bodies.”

The success of *Tobacco Road* may in part be due to its simplicity. Georgia sharecropper Jeeter Lester and his family agonize over their hunger and poverty, turning to thievery, murder, and debauchery, finishing the play in death and/or misery. In the opening scene Jeeter and his

son Dude argue over their ramshackle house and car, their wish that Jeeter's mother would die (they are tired of feeding her), and Jeeter's inability to get the seeds, and tools necessary to farm the land. Both men treat Dude's disrespect for his father as an expected and accepted behavior, as if Jeeter is not worthy of support from his own family. While they argue, Grandma Lester enters on her hands and knees, hoping to escape their notice. Her fear of the men is warranted by Dude's continual threat to knock her head off with the baseball he is throwing against the house. Jeeter's wife Ada enters the front porch, complaining about Jeeter's laziness and her need for snuff. Their daughter, Ellie May, completes the family portrait, shyly edging into view from behind a tree. Ellie May's shyness is attributed to a cleft lip running from the center of her lip to the left side of her nose.

Almost half of *Tobacco Road*'s first act focuses on establishing Jeeter's laziness and the family's overall trashiness. Dude is abnormally cruel, while the women are all victims of Jeeter's disregard. When Lov Bensey, Jeeter and Ada's son-in-law, arrives with a sack of turnips, the family's monstrosity grows. Lov, at a stalemate with his

wife Pearl, hopes to get marital advice from Jeeter. In the year that Lov and Pearl have been married, Pearl has not spoken to her husband, or allowed him to touch her. Lov argues that he has been reasonable, “I tried kicking her and I tried pouring water on her and chunking rocks and sticks at her, but it don’t do no good” (483). Audiences learn that Jeeter sold her to Lov for seven dollars when she was twelve years old. Now that Pearl is thirteen, Lov sees no reason for her to avoid him. Instead of receiving the assistance he came for, Lov is seduced by Ellie May and Jeeter steals his turnips, running deep into the woods. Throughout this scene Ada and Grandma Lester poke sticks at Lov to keep him from either catching Jeeter or getting away from Ellie May.

While Ada, Ellie May, Dude, and Grandma Lester wait for Jeeter to return and share the turnips with them, Sister Bessie, a widowed preacher, arrives, insisting that God told her to come to the Lester farm. At first, she reprimands the Lesters’ moral laxity, but Sister Bessie then reveals that she has her sights set on marrying sixteen-year-old Dude. Bessie seals the marriage proposal by pressing Dude against her body, stroking him with her

free hand, and promising to buy him a new car. The last page of the first act finally introduces action that is not based on sex, laziness, or thieving. Captain Tim, the owner of Jeeter's land, is coming to Tobacco Road, and all hope that he will bring the financial backing necessary for the Lesters and their neighbors to resume sharecropping.

Acts Two and Three are further variations of Act One, confirming the Lester family's status as moral reprobates. Captain Tim will allow Jeeter to sharecrop if rent is paid, but Jeeter has no money, no credit, and even his oldest son (who has become successful through hard work and isolation from his family) refuses to help. Pearl runs away from Lov, and Jeeter holds her captive for him, intending to extract ransom money. Grandma Lester wanders off and is believed to be dead. Dude runs over an African American man with his new automobile, about which Jeeter comments, "Niggers will get killed. Looks like there just ain't no way to stop it" (505). The play ends with Dude driving over Ada with the car. She manages to bite Jeeter and free Pearl just before she falls face down into the dirt and dies. Lov agrees to put up with Ellie May as a wife, since she will cook for and sleep with him, and they leave for his home. Jeeter

sits on the porch and falls asleep as a shingle drops from the house and the curtain descends.

Tobacco Road's place in the development of the female white trash cultural stereotype is significant. As the previous chapters suggest, before *Tobacco Road*, plays featuring poor white rural women were often either dark tragedies valorizing a family's efforts to survive, or comedies that showed a struggle between the noble poor and laughable white trash. Although plays like Harold Williamson's *Peggy* and Paul and Erma Green's *Fixins'*, toured nationally with the Carolina Playmakers, the Playmakers, though well regarded, were never famous, and their plays never became household words. *Tobacco Road* does not present tragic characters struggling to be good and righteous despite economic setbacks; it presents immoral people who will cheat and rob anyone, including their own family members, and who never regret their corrupt behavior. The Lesters, the family at the center of the play, represent the worst social outcome of the Depression—a family that no longer has faith or hope in the law, governmental policy, or religion.

Women, Representation, Text

Unlike the outspoken women in the previous plays studied here, the female characters in *Tobacco Road* are passive victims of both the economic system and the men who control their daily lives. Over half of the women in the play either do not speak or have speech impairment. Of the two women who do talk, only Sister Bessie, who has money and sexual allure, gains respect from the male characters. The women all have some kind of physical disability or illness, except for Pearl, who is regarded as an angelic creature from another world. Ellie May struggles with a cleft lip; Sister Bessie, in the novel and original stage directions, has no nose,[56] Ada is "pellagra-ridden," and Grandma Lester is described as "an old bent hag" who "crawls, whimpering, along the ground," moving "painfully and slowly" (Kirkland 477-479). If Caldwell and Kirkland had combined the most negative analysis of white poverty from the *Eugenic Family Studies*, they could not have created female characters more likely to cause revulsion, or to be dismissed. As the social scientists whose work

[56] Broadway actresses never agreed to convey Sister Bessie's missing nose with stage makeup and the description was cut from published versions of the play.

appears in the *Family Studies* proclaim, “With poor physical structure, weakened mental condition, laziness, and shiftlessness becoming a disease, what chance is there for any reform in such a person?” (61). The physical “abnormalities” of the Lester women, combined with their moral laxity, pushes them beyond the redemption of mainstream America.

The immorality of the Lester women is focused on the two sisters, Pearl and Ellie May. With one pure and beautiful and the other seductive and disfigured, these characters offer opposite extremes of suggestive representation. What sets Pearl and Ellie May apart from other objectified female characters on Broadway is their status as poor white rural southerners. Pearl represents the potential for redemption among poor whites, and part of this potential comes from rejection of her own family.

The Lester’s treatment of Pearl stands as the primary focus of their monstrosity. From her pre-pubescent forced marriage to her captivity at Jeeter’s hands when she runs away from her husband, Pearl is offered as the innocent victim of white trash degeneracy. She stalwartly protects her virginity, and, although she wants to leave her husband

and Tobacco Road, she is terrified of venturing to the city on her own. The threat of male sexuality pursues Pearl relentlessly from her husband to her father:

> JEETER: Ain’t she pretty! She’s about the prettiest piece in the whole country. . . .
>
> ADA: Go away, Jeeter.
>
> JEETER: (*who hasn’t the slightest intention of going away*). Ain’t she growed some in the past year, though? She’s most a grown woman by now. (*Moves Pearl’s dress the better to see her figure*). By God and by Jesus if she ain’t.
>
> ADA: (*sharply—slapping Jeeter’s hand away*). Stop that, Jeeter.
>
> JEETER: What for? She is, ain’t she? Look how white and gold she looks with that yellow hair hanging down her back. . . .What are you standing there crying for, Pearl?

Pearl never answers Jeeter’s question. In fact, throughout the play she barely speaks at all, except to insist on her love for her mother, and her fear of men. Despite her silence, or perhaps because of it, Pearl represents a pure, virtuous white womanhood, standing in stark contrast to the

other Lesters. Because she is voiceless while her family talks about and around her, she exists more as a symbol than as a character; she is the site of power that objectifies and erases the force of the other characters.

Jeeter is amazed that he could father such a beautiful girl, until Ada reveals that Jeeter had nothing to do with the conception:

> ADA: There ain't no Lester in her. Her real Pa wouldn't have no truck with any of you.
>
> JEETER: Who was it, Ada?
>
> ADA: Nobody you ever knew. He came from South Carolina and was on his way to Texas. (499)

Although Ada does not reveal the man's name or his business on Tobacco Road, she makes it clear that he is from a different world than the white trash Lesters. If white trash is marked as a separate category of whiteness, and therefore a separate racial group, Pearl is, as Turner suggests, "in every way an outsider. . . whose presence marks the rest of the family as racially other" (8). She is the one character that audiences could identify with, or for whom they could at least cheer in her attempts to escape the disturbing world of rural Georgia. Delicate and

silent, Pearl is the concrete sign of her family's Otherness.

Pearl not only reinforces mainstream ideas of white femininity, but also allows audiences, thrilled with the strange eroticism of *Tobacco Road*, to connect their theatrical experience with a comfortable and accepted moral standard. In critical moments, such as the final scene, when Ada frees Pearl from Jeeter just before she dies, Pearl is silent and immobile while other characters attempt to control her both physically and emotionally. She is only able to make her escape to Augusta when her father is defeated and her mother is dead. Moments like this emphasize Pearl's moral virtue; even in the face of her father's degenerate parenting, she refuses to leave her mother's side. Through her embodiment of idealized white virtue, she draws attention to her family's subjection within the larger community, making the power of that idealization visible.

We never learn Pearl's fate. Her flight to Augusta reinforces notions of salvation, but they are just notions. Her escape at the end of the play might be identified as a positive, freeing act, her ability to break free of her

oppressive husband and father symbolizing her ultimate success. Pearl's "freedom," however, given the social structures of the South in the 1930s, ultimately dooms her to a similar or worse fate. The best she could have hoped for, given her education, age, and lack of connections in Augusta, would have been a grueling job in the textile mills; at worst, she would have ended up prostituting herself for the sake of basic survival.

Ellie May lacks Pearl's unspoken power. In as much as Pearl is an idealized representation, Ellie May is a failure, as she is neither beautiful nor pure. The character description reads:

> Ellie May is eighteen, and not unattractive as to figure. Her eyes are good; her hair is brown. The outstanding feature, however, is a slit lip, red and fiery. (Kirkland 479)

Compare this to the character description for Pearl:

> Pearl is a beautiful child. She looks at least sixteen, in spite of the fact that she is much less than that. . . .her hair hangs down over her shoulders like a cloud of spun gold. (498)

All of the men on Tobacco Road long for Pearl, including Jeeter, but she refuses to let any of them get near her. Ellie May is routinely shunned because of her disability, but wants a man so badly that she seduces her brother-in-law. Ellie May and Lov's "sex scene," in which they writhe on, around, and across each other's bodies, became the most scandalous few moments of the play.

Described as "wriggling" and "horsing" in the stage directions, Ellie May's seductive movement is staged as a series of erotic scoots across the floor. Sitting on the ground in her dingy, tattered dress, Ellie May gradually reveals more and more of her legs as she edges closer and closer to Lov, eventually revealing that she does not "have any pants on at all." Ellie May's movement across the ground occurs while Jeeter philosophizes on the future of sharecropping on the other side of the stage. Lov, distracted from his croker sack of turnips, moves to Ellie May and "begins to fondle her. Their backs meet and rub together in a primitive love gesture" (Kirkland 486). The entire family simultaneously focuses on the pair and the abandoned turnips:

> Dude: Lov ain’t thinking about no turnips. He’s wanting to hang up with Ellie May. Look at her straining for him. She’s liable to bust a gut if she don’t look out.
>
> Jeeter: By God, Lov ain’t never go that close before. He said he wouldn’t never get close enough to Ellie May to touch her with a stick. But he ain’t paying no mind to that now. I bet he don’t even know she’s got a slit-lip on her. If he does know it, he don’t give a good goddam. (486)

Jeeter, seizing the opportunity, grabs the sack of turnips and runs off into the woods, while Ada and Grandma Lester “move down on Lov to help Ellie May” (486). Lov attempts to follow Jeeter as Ada calls out:

> ADA: Go on back to Ellie May, Lov. Don’t be scared of her. You might even get to like her and let Pearl come back here to me. (487)

Ellie May is disposable to her family while Pearl is the Lester’s trophy daughter. Both women, however, represent types of eroticism rooted in poverty and lack of cultural power, each sister expanding the power of the other’s

representation. Because Ellie May scoots on the ground to seduce Lov, her disability is marked clearly through her body's inability to stand or walk, although her disability has nothing to do with her legs. She is wearing a tattered dress with no undergarments – what does it mean then that her lower body is dragged across the dirt? She may be intoxicating to sex-starved Lov, but she is also coated in dirt.

This scene positions Ellie May as both literally and figuratively dirty, but it is her cleft lip that provokes binary terror through the layering of the words "disability" and "eroticism." As Schneider argues binary terror at the combined effect of "art" and "porn," Ellie May's seduction of Lov triggers a similar binary terror, in which "a host of distinctions is threatened, as if linked to one another in a circle of dominoes making up the Symbolic Order" (14). Ellie May's writhing body works explicitly, unraveling cultural distinctions of beauty and allure. Broadway theatres, known for their display of beautiful young women, were not in the business of suggesting that an imperfect body could elicit erotic thoughts and images. The terror invoked by Ellie May's

seduction scene is only temporary; Pearl's presence ensures the maintenance of acceptable forms of sexual appeal. Ellie May is the throwaway daughter, willing to please at any cost, but essentially unwanted, undesirable, unrequited. Her sexuality, griminess, and disability frame her as trash. While Pearl, as a member of the Lester family, is also white trash, her actions show a rejection of her family's behavior and cultural position.

Gender and Production

> *I'd always known* Tobacco Road *was dirty. I had hoped audiences would do something for these people in the story about a slice of life they were seeing for the first time. When I'd asked Margaret Wycherly what she thought, she agreed. "Oh, of course it's dirty. It's entertaining but it* is *dirty."*[57]
>
> —Ruth Hunter

It is difficult to see the characters of *Tobacco Road* as more than one-dimensional, negative caricatures: they are all cruel, shiftless, or pathetic. Critics and

[57] Wycherly played Ada Lester in the original cast of *Tobacco Road*.

audiences were reluctant to separate Kirkland's play from Caldwell's novel. Kirkland, however, eliminates Caldwell's interest in social commentary, instead focusing on the scandalous and horrific qualities of the characters, which creates a story that is more comical and ridiculous than tragic. The novel's narration, as mentioned previously, continually expresses the idea of sharecroppers as victims of wealthy landowners, which disappears altogether in the play. Instead, the play positions Jeeter's poverty as a result of his laziness and stupidity. There are additional differences between the play and novel: Caldwell never provides Jeeter with an opportunity to rent the land from Captain Tim; Sister Bessie's interest in sex extends to a variety of men in the novel, including Jeeter; Grandma Lester gets killed by Dude in his automobile; and the novel ends with both Jeeter and Ada dying in a fire.

Although Caldwell does not present the Lesters as deeply complex, his novel stops short of farcical ridicule. Kirkland's adaptation, on the other hand, revels in the poor white Southerner as a cultural gag. Caldwell, though supportive of the play, was confused by audience laughter at what he considered tragic characters. He did not protest

the alterations, however, until it became obvious that the play was not achieving the social change he had hoped for (Mixon 59). Critics have accused Kirkland of contradicting the “brooding, usually silent grotesques of the novel and mak[ing] stereotypes out of original conceptions” (Howard 60). This condemnation assumes that Caldwell’s original depiction of the Lesters is not a collection of stereotypes. The characters in the play, lifted directly from the novel, may have simply increased their stereotypical representation through the actors’ concentration on “playing for laughs” (Mixon 59).

In the 1941 film, directed by John Ford and adapted by Jack Kirkland from the play, the character of Ellie May is played by Gene Tierney. Ford made *Tobacco Road* just a year after *The Grapes of Wrath*, and it was such a box office failure that it is often forgotten among his films. The Ellie May and Lov’s “horsing” scene is one of many that brought criticism:

> . . . the embarrassing spectacle of Ward Bond and Gene Tierney writhing toward each other in the dirt to convey sexual passion [is] among the lowest points in Ford’s oeuvre. (McBride 183)

In the film, Ellie May does not have a cleft lip; her age, raised from eighteen to twenty-three, is given as the reason she cannot find a husband. Although sex symbol Gene Tierney writhes and gasps toward Lov, it is understood among the characters of *Tobacco Road* that, “no man wants a woman that old” (Ford). Instead of the “horsing” scene culminating in simulated sex, Ellie May viciously attacks Lov as soon as she climbs on top of him. Ada and Grandma Lester move in to beat Lov with their sticks, not to keep him from escaping Ellie May, but to keep him from chasing Jeeter and his sack of turnips. Although Ellie May of the film fits mainstream notions of beauty and eroticism, her sexuality quickly shifts into brutal aggression.

Ruth Hunter, the original Broadway Ellie May, believed after first read-through that the *Tobacco Road* script “stank to high heaven” (14). She was mortified by the character description, and shocked that she had to appear onstage barefoot. She had not yet learned that dirt would cover the stage floor to evoke the feel of Georgia farmland. As an out-of-work actress in desperate need of money, Hunter felt that she could not afford to turn down

the part of Ellie May. She agreed to do the play, convinced that it would close within two weeks.

The original Broadway production did not have a costume designer; instead, a box of ragged dresses was sent from Maude O'Dell's (Sister Bessie) relatives from Beaufort "in one of the Carolinas" (32). Hunter is handed a ragged gray dress to wear, and is then told by director Tony Brown that, "We would like to have you give the impression, Ellie May, that you don't have any pants on at all" (33). Hunter, already embarrassed by the frank sexuality of her character, negotiated dirt-colored pants, convinced that her reputation among other actresses would be ruined if it looked like she was not wearing undergarments. When told by actress Shirley Booth, "I hear there's a little girl with an awful scene in your play," Hunter admits to keeping the specifics of her role a secret from actors outside of the cast (33).

Without a costume designer, Hunter had to figure out the make-up for Ellie May's cleft lip by herself. This physical characteristic is the primary reason given in the play and novel for Ellie May's inability to find a husband; it is also used to solidify Jeeter's selfishness and

disregard for the women in his family, since he has refused to take Ellie May to a surgeon for eighteen years. Hunter's lip had to look completely split all the way to her nose for audiences to get the full effect of her disability. James Barton (Jeeter) had seen fish skin used with stage makeup to create a similar effect in a movie once, and suggested that Hunter use that technique. The idea of putting fish skin between her nose and mouth day after day in a stage performance repulsed Hunter and she rejected that method. Another actor suggested glue. After researching medical books in the public library for the correct appearance, Hunter finally came up with a solution: red yarn held in place with collodion (used for removing corns) and red stage make-up along the yarn (37). She created Ellie May's "garbled pronunciation" by holding the tip of her tongue along a platinum wire which held her upper dental work in place. The resulting line readings caused the other actors to laugh in the play's first read-through, and were exactly what the director was looking for (13).

Hunter's frustration in the first rehearsal of the "horsing" scene reveals the complexity of representation in

performance. Hunter states, “You could *act* this way, maybe, but you couldn’t *be* this way” (22). Appalled by the blatant eroticism of the scene, Hunter doubted that any woman, regardless of her class status, would behave like Ellie May publicly. She was equally certain that there could not be a family of poor whites in the South as degenerate as the Lesters. Caldwell admitted to Hunter that he did not know of a family like the Lesters, but instead “took the worst member from five different families and put them all together” (Hunter 91). Fellow actresses, visiting Hunter backstage, admitted that they would never play Ellie May, and expressed condolences to Hunter. It is important to clarify here that these condolences were not for Hunter’s involvement in the play itself, since it had a successful run, but for her playing a character whose eroticism was based on the humiliation of having a disability.

Although Hunter speaks freely about the economic stress of an acting career, she does not contextualize her pre-*Tobacco Road* poverty within the greater economic crisis of the Depression. She does indicate that the play’s success might have been connected to the poverty and unemployment common at the time, expressing her distaste

for the Depression-era audiences who sat, night after night, laughing at the Lester family. Hunter theorizes that, “People were fascinated with *Tobacco Road* because every last one who bought a ticket could say, ‘My, my, I sure am better than that trash’” (91). Considering the exaggeration of both the characters and the performance of them, it would be difficult to find individuals more degenerate than the Lesters. With poverty a way of life for hundreds of thousands of Americans, those who could afford tickets to see a Broadway show were most likely not those who might identify with the Lesters’ hunger, loss of land, and economic desperation.

Caldwell and Kirkland believed that *Tobacco Road* would draw attention to the impact the Depression had on rural America, and that it would indirectly help sharecroppers in the South. Many performers also felt that they were doing some good for destitute southerners. But the production was geared toward making money, and laughs were the top priority. Hunter complained that, although the original Broadway cast (particularly Sam Byrd and herself) genuinely wanted to make a difference, actors that replaced the originals felt less and less sympathy for their characters.

She cites this as a primary reason for leaving the cast after five successful years.

Not all actors who followed the original cast were cavalier about their roles. Will Geer, who played Jeeter Lester for 623 performances until its close in 1941, connected his acting career with activism. Geer is best known for his performance of Grandpa Walton on the television show “The Waltons,” which presented a positive view of poor southern whites during the Depression. In the 1930s he helped organize the New Theatre Group in Los Angeles, which produced *Stevedore* and *Waiting for Lefty*, studied Russian theatre in Moscow, worked with the Group, performed in Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock*, and, with the “Gang of Five” (Geer, Harold Fithian, Herta Ware, Gordon Orme, and Woody Guthrie), played to farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Geer’s association with the Moscow Art Theatre and the Group drew the attention of the House on Un-American Activities Commission and was subpoenaed in 1951. According to a story told by blacklisted actress Mary Virginia Farmer, Geer entered the hearing dressed as Jeeter Lester, wearing red flannel underwear beneath his overalls, and chewing gum like

tobacco.[58] As he approached the front of the room he looked around and asked, “Where is the hot seat?” (Eagles 2). His refusal to testify at this hearing caused him to be blacklisted.[59] Geer’s activism suggests what might have been possible in the Broadway production of *Tobacco Road*. If it were performed with empathy toward the characters, the play could have challenged audiences to think about poverty, disability, and regional prejudices differently, despite problematic elements in the script.

Critical Reception

Shortly after *Tobacco Road* opened on Broadway in 1933, the *New York Daily News* printed an editorial suggesting that the play authentically revealed the dangerous reality of poor southern whites and their “seductions, adulteries, incests, casual deaths, and general good-for-nothingness.” After chronicling the degeneracy of poor whites, and the shocking number of them in the population, the editorial warns readers:

[58] Farmer worked with the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre Project
[59] After being blacklisted, Geer formed Theatricum Botanicum, a company of blacklisted theatre workers in California.

> These people have a large voice in making State laws down South, and a considerable voice in making laws affecting all of us, at Washington. . . .If you don't know what kind of fool, fanatic, and pestiferous laws these people would naturally favor, and have all too often put over on all of us, go and see "Tobacco Road." (25 January 1934)

In this editorial, white southern rural poverty poses a dangerous threat to the political interests of a northern urban middle class. While this is an extreme response to both the play and its subject matter, it nonetheless is included in the Broadway production's program, proudly reprinted as an example of the play's message. Of course, this kind of newspaper attention was a great help to the play's publicity, and perhaps was included in the program because of its impact on ticket sales. *Tobacco Road*'s program cover also claims that it is "The Most Discussed Play in the History of the American Theatre." The play is not, however, the most discussed play in American theatre history.

Tobacco Road is barely mentioned in American theatre history texts, aside from its record-breaking seven years

on Broadway. Given the play's content, this is hardly surprising, despite its record-breaking run. When the *Tobacco Road* is noted it is typically in relation to attendance. Glenn Hughes' *History of the American Theatre* (1951) includes Kirkland's adaptation in a list of plays from 1933-34, categorizing it as a play "which almost failed, then (after additional injections of profanity) rallied and went on to a record-breaking run of seven years" (431). Felicia Hardison Londré and Daniel J. Watermeier's *The History of North American Theatre* (1999) mentions in a list of long-running hits, "the sensational, rural melodrama, *Tobacco Road*, chalked-up over three thousand continuous performances" (300).

Bernard Hewitt includes a negative opening-night review of the play in *Theatre U.S.A.* (1959) as an example of the effect the Depression had on Broadway tastes. Hewitt, clearly puzzled by *Tobacco Road*'s popularity, eventually states:

> One would like to think that *Tobacco Road* succeeded as a social document, as an indictment of conditions in the rural South. But Caldwell's social satire is well laced with Rabelaisian

> humor and, however the play was first performed, it soon was played for laughs. Perhaps the audiences came to laugh at Americans even more depressed than themselves. (392)

Hewitt's treatment of *Tobacco Road* is significant, although he relies almost entirely on one review to support his argument. He is, however, the first theatre historian to analyze the play in the context of the larger American culture. John Anderson derides *Tobacco Road*'s success in *The American Theatre* (1938), remarking that, along with other popular plays featuring "somewhat raffish old men," the character of Jeeter Lester conflicts with America's "nation of alleged go-getting business men" by producing an icon who "seems to be a worthless loafer" (43).

More recent historical commentary on Kirkland's adaptation appears in Wilmeth and Bigsby's *Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume II: 1870-1945* (1998), in sections written by Thomas Postlewait, Brenda Murphy, and Thomas Riis. *Tobacco Road* is listed by Riis as one of several long-running hits (440), and Postlewait includes the play in a discussion of country plays, among which Kirkland's is seen as a "satirical and critical

representation . . . nasty and grotesque” which succeeded “to the delight of urban audiences” (149). Murphy considers *Tobacco Road* the “final decadence of the white folk tradition” (310). She sees the Lester family as a “cultural icon for a self-enclosed American rural society,” one that is seen as so absurd that audiences are able to laugh at how removed they are from the bizarre culture presented on stage (311).

Tobacco Road, however, while it emerged out of the folk drama movement, is significantly different from plays of that genre. The majority of folk drama productions were never intended as Broadway successes; rather, they were presented in or around the communities represented on stage. Although *The House of Connelly* was produced by the Group, their concerns were more artistic and social than financial, connecting them to other folk drama interests. And significantly for the purposes of this dissertation, *Tobacco Road* is the first play to feature primarily negative portrayals of poor whites. The play’s presence and success on Broadway, on tour, and in film ensured that millions of audiences would get to laugh, not at white poverty per se, but specifically at white trash. Following

the popularity of *Tobacco Road* came similar representations of white trash: *Lil' Abner*, Ma and Pa Kettle, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *the Dukes of Hazzard*, are just a few examples.

Also notable is the timing of *Tobacco Road's* December 1933 opening in relation to the Depression. The beginning of the Depression is typically marked by the stock market crash in October of 1929, although economists agree that this event did not *cause* the financial collapse. Between 1929 and 1933, the U.S. experienced the most dramatic national and individual trauma in its history, with an estimated twelve million workers losing their jobs at an average of 100,000 per week. 1933 is marked as the worst year of the Depression, although the crisis did not end until the U.S. entered World War II in 1941. Farm income dropped from $12 billion in 1929 to $5 billion in 1933, and industrial production was cut in half, most severely affecting the Northeast and Midwest. Sixty to eighty percent of the industrial laborers in these regions lost their jobs (Kurtz 57-58).

As the success of *Tobacco Road* continued during the late 1930s, so did the nation's economic problems. In 1938

the National Emergency Council released *The Report on Economic Conditions of the South*, of which the advance copy provoked President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to state:

> It is my conviction that the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem—the Nation's problem, not merely the South's. For we have an economic unbalance in the Nation as a whole, due to this very condition of the South. It is an unbalance that can and must be righted, for the sake of the South and of the Nation. (qtd. in Carlton and Coclanis, 19)

Roosevelt's statement, released to the press before the report itself, produced controversy and hostility from both the North and South. In the North, opposition believed that the report blamed the economic crisis on industrial projects that moved to the South for cheaper labor; southern resistance came primarily from "New South" boosters who considered negative publicity an attack on future business success.

Once the report was released, it circulated widely, with over half a million copies distributed by the end of 1938. Detractors, regardless of regional affiliation, were

mainly political conservatives who feared that Roosevelt would use the document to shut down what some in his administration considered unfair and unsafe industrial centers. Supporters formed alliances, like the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which turned out to be the main follow-up to the report, as the government had no intention of risking political capital through legislative programs aimed at making sweeping changes in the South (Carlton and Coclanis 20-27).

In this climate, what purpose did a play like *Tobacco Road* serve? Mark Fearnow believes that the play "performed the cultural work of reducing the tremendous 'poverty anxieties' of depression America" (107), but for whom, how, and at what cost? It is not realistic to assume that unemployed Northeastern factory workers could afford tickets to *Tobacco Road*, just so they could laugh at the jobless farm workers in the South. Since those who could pay the ticket prices were more likely to be from the white middle and upper classes, it is more useful to analyze why *these* audiences might pursue *Tobacco Road*'s social therapy. Jeff Turner argues that the play "simply marginalizes the rural poor in order to bolster white middle-class privilege

while also reinforcing northern misconceptions of southern white identity" (11), which also indicates that the play may have served as some sort of cultural release valve.

If so, at the center of that marginalization are notions of poor white southern women as lascivious, slow-witted pawns of degenerate men. The *Tobacco Road* stage, littered with the bodies of women who have suffered at the hands of cruel, imbecilic men, provided audiences with extreme images of female degradation. Male spectators could, as Jill Dolan argues, "identify with the active male protagonist portrayed in the narrative through voyeuristic and fetishistic viewing conventions" sharing in the satisfaction of that character to "fulfill his desire for the story's passively situated female" (*Desire* 121-122). Where does that situate women in the *Tobacco Road* audience? Following Dolan's analysis, these women have two options: "identify with the active male and symbolically participate in the female performer's objectification," or "identify with the narrative's objectified female and position herself as an object" (124-125). Given the cultural position of the female characters, how could a woman identify with one of them without feeling degraded herself?

By the end of the play, the only woman in a remotely positive position is Pearl, who, motherless and terrified of her father, runs alone toward an unknown future in the textile mills. The likelihood that even female spectators objectified the women in *Tobacco Road* suggests a heightened racial "othering" of white trash, and increased fetishization of poor white southern women.

That *Tobacco Road* opened at the height of the Depression, and closed just as the economic crisis ended, suggests that the national trauma was critical to the play's success. Perhaps the malnourished Lesters would not have been so funny if so many Americans were not also starving. Reviews of the Broadway production display a level of disgust that might compel a potential audience to attend simply for the grotesque display. Percy Hammond, in the New York *Herald Tribune,* describes *Tobacco Road* as "relentless, brutish, and unclean," suitable for "those who get a naughty thrill from stark disclosures of the primitive human animal while writhing in the throes of gender" (5 Dec. 1933). Joseph Wood wrote in the *Nation* that the play was "beyond all morality and all sense of dignity and shame" (20 Dec. 1933), and Brooks Atkinson's *New York*

Times review called it “one of the grossest episodes ever put on stage” (5 Dec. 1933). These reviews consistently focus on the sexuality of the female characters, specifically pointing to Ellie May’s seduction of Lov. For these critics poverty in the South, as seen through *Tobacco Road*, is more about morality than economics, despite the insistence by Caldwell and others connected with the production, that the opposite is true.

Harold Clurman’s review recognizes the complications of the play for audience members sympathetic to the economic crisis experienced by many families, in the North and South. He acknowledges that, “to most of the yellow press,” the play provokes loathing, although Henry Hull’s performance as Jeeter Lester is routinely viewed as exceptional acting. Clurman does not identify which newspapers, journals, or writers he is referring to, but he makes it clear that, in his interpretation, *Tobacco Road* had been judged too harshly. He also states that, “to the liberal opposition *Tobacco Road* is a racy folk study that contains the pathos and humor of everyday life amongst the outcast poor white of the South” (1035). Clurman disagrees with both views. He alleges that *Tobacco Road* is a

dishonest play, one that appalls him through its slick presentation of rural poverty:

> . . .it arouses neither sorrow, pity, or anger. It leaves one coldly amused, and when one realizes that one is laughing at unfortunate human beings one leaves the theatre with a lowered sense of one's humanity or a suspicion that the authors have not told the whole story, have in fact cheated us with half-truths. (1036)

Without the benefit of seeing the performance that Clurman reviews, his analysis of the play coincides with my own reaction to the text. Clurman's analysis, written at the beginning of the play's seven-year run, suggests the negative impact of comedic popular culture stereotypes. If the audiences that flocked to *Tobacco Road* performances reacted similarly to the majority of reviewers, their perception was either one of revulsion or righteousness. Based on "half-truths," characters like the Lester family become cultural icons – representations of an entire class and region (Fearnow 107).

Critical Challenges in the South

Had I been more alert, it might have occurred to me that somehow a group of white Alabama farm folk had learned of my presence in New York, thrown together a theatrical troupe, and flown north to haunt me.

—Ralph Ellison

Novelist Ralph Ellison sat in the audience of *Tobacco Road* in 1936, soon after he had moved to New York. His response to the play was visceral, and his comment on the production shows the impact that the play often had on audiences. As *Tobacco Road* broke box office records, the perception that it was a "true" representation of the rural South grew. To many southerners, this reading was a sign of the North's misunderstanding of the region's culture. Yet southerners like Ellison found the play all too real. I have no interest in arguing that one southerner's response to *Tobacco Road* is more correct than another's, given the differences in communities throughout the region. It is more useful to view these differences as indications of how complex perceptions of race and class were in the 1930s South.

Advertising for *Tobacco Road* claimed that its comic draw had an equal effect on all audiences, as "Its lusty,

often lewd, lines evoked gales of laughter North, South, East, and West" (*Montgomery Advertiser* 3 June 1941). Despite this claim to universal appeal, reception of the stage version of *Tobacco Road* shows a divide between the North and South, as it became a symbol of the nation's cultural and economic problems. In the South, *Tobacco Road* was considered by many to be a malicious misrepresentation of a real economic crisis, and the national touring production of the play was protested in several southern cities (Mixon 60). Although some of the criticism directed at Caldwell and Kirkland centered on the sexual content of the play, southerners primarily complained of the mockery made of sharecroppers and of the region.

The most vocal of the southern critics belonged to the Vanderbilt Agrarians, a twelve member group that included Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and John Donald Wade. The Agrarians, based at Vanderbilt University, grew out of a few men who started gathering in 1915 for philosophical discussions. After World War I the group grew, and their focus turned to poetry, publishing the monthly journal *The Fugitive* from 1922 through 1925 (Conkin 16-20). By the late 1920s, the Agrarians were using their

poetry, plays, and essays to challenge what they saw as Northern industrialism intent on dislodging the rural culture of America in general, and of the South in particular.

The Agrarians' 1930 book, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, (New York: Harper and Brothers) contains twelve different essays, each of which is written by one of the Agrarians on his particular area of interest. These men — primarily poets and historians — saw themselves as public intellectuals who shared a duty to think and talk on the national stage about culture and community. Their ideas are largely conservative and anti-modernist. The Agrarians, however, are a perfect example of the complexity of southern culture in the 1930s. Donald Davidson and Frank Owsley were the only two who fully upheld the practice of segregation; Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and John Gould Fletcher believed that the agrarian cause should not address issues of race (though they largely supported equal rights for blacks); Herman Clarence Nixon openly argued for integration and equality (Conkin 73). So while they all wrote in defense of "traditional southern values," they,

like many other southerners, were unable to communicate these ideas cohesively.

To underestimate the importance of the Agrarians in early twentieth-century American thought eliminates a critical element in the culture wars of that time—specifically the shift from rural to urban and regional to national perspectives. A key element of the Agrarian argument was abhorrence of what they saw as "tainted" progress:

> If a community, or a section, or a race, or an age is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispensation, it must find the way to throw it off. To think that this cannot be done is pusillanimous. And if the whole community, section, race, or age thinks it cannot be done, then it has simply lost its political genius and doomed itself to impotence. (*I'll Take My Stand*, xx)

This statement claims that Americans have an inability to recognize the long-term dangers of industrialized culture, which the Agrarians, along with other Americans arguing the importance of rural values, saw as bad for both land and

community. Almost all of the Agrarians disregarded, however, notions of difference in both class and race which might impact southern perceptions about industrialism. Largely upper-middle class, the Agrarians could not identify with southerners whose need for work overshadowed theoretical disputes about that work's cultural effects (Hale 143-144).

The image of Jeeter Lester lazily acknowledging his world moving away from farming and toward industry, regardless of how much he may resent it, represents some of the Agrarians' fears for the new South. In *Tobacco Road,* sharecroppers unable to farm become degenerates, driven by carnal desire and consumerism, and the younger generation of Lesters is not concerned with protecting either the land or rural culture; they are concerned with shiny new cars, sex, and getting to the textile mill in Augusta. These elements of Caldwell's work troubled the Agrarians on two counts: first, that the South might follow this path to industrialism; and, second, that the South's rural image was based on representations like those found in *Tobacco Road*.

The Agrarians expanded their anti-industrialist agenda in individual writings, some of which singled out Caldwell, chastising him for his representation of the rural South. In “Sweet Are the Uses of Degeneracy” (1936),[60] Wade claims that Caldwell “apparently persuaded himself and many others, among them the editors of the intellectual weeklies in New York, that Jeeter Lester and his kind are fairly typical of twenty million Southern countrymen” (182). Wade does not reprimand Caldwell for a lack of talent, but for the way in which he chooses to use those abilities, insisting that his work would be more impressive if “he were not as plaintively anxious as he is to please the kind and class of people that he has come to be affiliated with — the detached, nervous, thrill-goaded metro-cosmopolitans” (192). On the one hand, Wade’s urban castigation is as extreme as some of the Northern attacks on the rural South. At the same time however, his irritation surrounding the “intellectual weeklies” is supported by a willingness by many Northern journalists to accept the characters and action of *Tobacco Road* as documentations of southern life. Unfortunately, while both the North and South acknowledged

[60] Originally published in *The Southern Review*, I (Winter 1936), 449-

that rural poverty was a problem, public intellectuals in each region managed to locate blame and suspicion with the other.

The Agrarians held rural culture as sacred, and perhaps what goaded them most about Caldwell's work is their perception of that culture's defacement. If the South of the 1920s and 1930s was committed to positioning that region as culturally developed, then the presentation of white trash on a Broadway stage as an "authentic" view of the rural South suggests that attempts to improve the image of the region was irrelevant. Taussig states that "thanks to defacement, images may become real" obscuring differences "between the representation and that which the representation represents" (53). Although the most degrading elements in *Tobacco Road* involve representations of women — it is their bodies more so than a concept of the rural South which are truly defaced, even in moments of explicit power and binary terror — the Agrarians do not argue for the honor of poor women, instead ignoring issues of gender entirely, making their critique complicit in the defacement. For the Agrarians, women, and representations

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of them, had little to do with critical issues facing the South.

Caldwell continued creating representations of poor southerners through his collaboration with then-wife, photographer Margaret Bourke-White, on the book *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). Caldwell and Bourke-White traveled throughout the South, taking photographs of the rural poor. The text of the book was written by Caldwell, who took it upon himself to write captions for the photos and put them in quotation marks—which could easily be interpreted as the subjects' own words by readers who skipped the introduction. The inside of the book jacket claims that readers will see "the heartrending story told with self-conscious candor by the living actors in this book," but both the photos and captions were doctored by Caldwell and Bourke-White to present the image of sharecroppers, both black and white, that they wanted America to see. In terms of intention their work is not offensive — sharecroppers in the South were generally destitute, and the book was intended to draw national attention and sympathy to their struggles. But good intentions do not validate misguided representation. Bourke-White, however, arranged the

subjects and their homes to make them look as pathetic as possible — re-arranging furniture, insisting that subjects wear their worst clothing, and taking decorations off of the walls – “making pictures that seemed to verify Caldwell’s fiction” (Kirby 59).

More disturbing is Caldwell’s writing. The now well-known photographs are captioned by words like “I’ve done the best I knew how all my life, but it didn’t amount to much in the end,” “It ain’t hardly worth the trouble to go on living,” and “Snuff is an almighty help when your teeth ache.” Caldwell and Bourke-White provide no sense of family relationships that are not burdens, and smiling subjects appear as either simple, or religiously fanatic. A review of the book in *The Nation* declared the South “so sick from its old infections of prejudice and poverty that it is a menace to the nation” (qtd. in Kirby 60). *You Have Seen Their Faces’* photographic “evidence” became, for this reviewer, a representation of a dangerous, mythical “other” from which the rest of the country needed protection.

White southern “degenerates” are still ridiculed today, but after 1933, the country learned a new slang term for their disapproval. *Tobacco Road*’s influence on

contemporary American popular culture is attributed more to the play than to the novel, which is echoed in the belief that “people who have never read a line of Caldwell know all about Jeeter Lester, and apply to the form of degeneracy to which it is appropriate the slur, ‘tobacco road’” (Frohock 213). In 1939 Sheilds McIlwaine wrote *The Southern Poor-White: From Lubberland to Tobacco Road,* in which he insists that “Jeeter Lester is to the poor-whites what Uncle Remus is to the Negroes—a name for his class” (240). Hartigan’s research of poor white Detroit neighborhoods in the early 1990s found the term “tobacco road” used to describe particularly poor and idle southerners who moved North to the city looking for work. A poor white woman in Detroit interviewed by Hartigan was relieved when a “tobacco road” family moved to a different neighborhood after their home burned (35). Hartigan’s interviewee may live in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Detroit, but at least she is not "tobacco road.”

The use of the term “tobacco road,” like “white trash,” reinforces a negative image of poor white southerners, and the connection between the Lesters’ behavior and cultural understandings of “white trash”

ultimately denies any redemptive possibilities for the characters. “White trash,” as Hartigan argues, represents a public position not easily redeemed because it “continues to serve as an irresistible referent to those that rupture white social etiquette” (“Unpopular” 327). Kirkland’s adaptation of Caldwell’s novel presents the women in the Lester family as either ridiculous or shocking, but at the core they are all desperate to get a hold of cultural power and stability. By promoting the stereotypes in *Tobacco Road* as mirrors of southern poverty, producers both encouraged the white trash myth and reinforced cultural tensions between the North and the South.

Conclusion

In six months no one will say "white trash" . . . it's the last racist thing you can say and get away with

— John Waters, 1994[61]

My people were not remarkable. We were ordinary, but even so we were mythical. We were the they *everyone talks about — the ungrateful poor.*

— Dorothy Allison

Writer Dorothy Allison's work, much of it based on her childhood as southern rural white trash, evokes the pain of being trapped as "less than" in a nation obsessed with being "the best." For me, books like Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1996) stir memories of my own childhood in the rural South, reminding me of how lucky I was to find the theatrical and academic worlds. Both of my parents dreamt of being teachers, but, discouraged from college by their

[61] As quoted in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, edited by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz. This comment was originally quoted by Tad Friend in the *New York Magazine* article "White Hot Trash."

respective families, settled for working-class lives. Their love of books saved my sister and me from the hard lives that my cousins experience in construction, fast food, and gas stations, but did not shelter us from the bleak realities of class difference in the United States. In many ways, I became interested in the plays here because they affected me in the same way as Allison's work, bringing back memories of the world I grew up in.

Allison's fiction mirrors a certain element of each play studied in this dissertation — a woman's struggle to get out of a destitute situation and improve both her economic and cultural standing. For Lily in *Fixin's* and Pearl in *Tobacco Road,* there is no clear sense of what their futures may hold, or if they will even be better off in the towns they are running towards than on the farms they are running from. In *Peggy*, the dream of a better life is gone by the end of the play, and Peggy, soon to be saddled with a husband she does not want, faces a future that, initially at least, is full of dread. *The House of Connelly's* Patsy is the only character whose life is drastically improved through her efforts at moving up and out of the tenant farm life, based on the ending that was

produced by the Group. But her success results from her skills and knowledge of farming. Patsy does not try to persuade anyone that she is above agricultural work; in fact, her relationship with Will Connelly blossoms while she teaches him how to organize and run the Connelly Plantation.

None of the female characters in these plays are able to escape the effect of presumptions that they are sexually loose. Lily and Peggy are both unrightfully accused of promiscuity by family members, and those accusations overshadow their arguments for better standards of living. Patsy continually fights off Uncle Bob who, despite her relationship with Will (or perhaps because of it), believes that her body should be at his disposal. Pearl and her sister Ellie May might have different attitudes about men and sex, but they are both considered their father's property and therefore must go with whatever man makes him the best offer.

In 1941, *Tobacco Road* closed on Broadway, but popular culture use of the white trash stereotype in more wide-ranging media forms, such as television and film, continued. Images of poor whites in comic strips like *Li'l*

Abner (1934-1965), the *Ma and Pa Kettle* films (1950-1957), and television sit-com *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1970) flourished. *Li'l Abner* was adapted from a comic strip to a musical in 1956, and was made into a movie in 1959. In the musical, the federal government determines Dogpatch to be "the most unnecessary, no-account" town in the United States, and plans to level the town and use the land for nuclear testing. The show's comedy centers on attempts by Dogpatch residents to prove that they are in fact useful citizens of the nation. As a subplot, Daisy Mae plans to "catch" Li'l Abner on Sadie Hawkins Day, therefore obliging him to marry her.[62] The obliteration of Dogpatch, however, would eliminate Sadie Hawkins Day, ruining her chances of marriage.

The musical *Li'l Abner* reflects changes in the comic strip during World War II, in which, according to Anthony Harkins in *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (2004), creator Al Capp's work took an "accelerating shift away from presenting Dogpatch as an even remotely

[62] Sadie Hawkins Day was started by prominent Dogpatch resident Hekzebiah Hawkins, who worried that his daughter Sadie, "the homliest gal in the hills," would never find a husband on her own merit. The event was a footrace, in which all the town's bachelors were chased by all the single women. If caught, the men were forced to marry their captors.

realistic mountain community and toward a pure fantasy realm of sexually charged grotesques and monsters" (Harkins 135). Harkins outlines the status of Dogpatch residents as culturally and racially "othered," unable to pass as members of the white middle-to-upper classes (128-135), but overlooks the significance of gender in the comic strip. Capp created female characters who are either hideously animalistic or statuesque beauties. Both groups of women are routinely disregarded by male characters, and even Daisy Mae, the most beautiful woman in Dogpatch, must beg for a husband.

The first season of *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962) offers unmistakable links to theatrical ideas about gender and class. In the tenth episode, "Pygmalion and Elly," Sonny Drysdale (bank president Mr. Drysdale's stepson) decides to teach Elly May Clampett proper social habits. He calls her his Pygmalion,[63] and refers to her and her family as "barbarians from Tobacco Road." Describing himself as Cesar, he details how he will take the "savage" Elly May and train her as his "love slave." Drysdale brags about his

[63] George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1916), centers on phonetics professor Henry Higgins' attempts to turn cockney flower girl Eliza

theatrical training at Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Dartmouth, and makes repeated literary allusions meant to showcase his prestigious education. Elly May does not grasp his references, and the comedy in these moments relies on a television audiences' cultural, and specifically theatrical, knowledge. Despite Drysdale's attempts to transform Elly May, she rejects his notions of civility, and her unsophisticated perceptions point to his prejudices.

The dialogue in this episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies* indicates that the stereotypes in *Tobacco Road* had a lasting impact on popular culture perceptions of poor southern white women. The 1960s were culturally different than the 1930s, however, in regards to both women and rural identity, shifting character and plot elements of white trash representation. The comedy in *The Beverly Hillbillies* is based on the Clampett's status as white trash with money, disrupting sacred social binaries of wealth and class. This confusion leads to binary terror, as the multi-millionaire Clampetts refuse to change their backwoods lifestyle. The upper-class sense of respectability in

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Doolittle's speech and manner into that of a proper English lady. The

Beverly Hills cannot entirely trump the Clampett's rural simplicity, and vice versa. Through this binary chaos, the sit-com simultaneously supports white trash stereotypes and critiques mainstream class and regional biases.

Images of poor southern whites in popular culture, like *Li'l Abner* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, suggest that they continue to be loathed and feared, yet are also consistently objects of comedy. Talk show host Jerry Springer and filmmaker John Waters offer popular images of white trash that vary from bizarre to criminal to idiotic, but always universally laughable. Films like *Poor White Trash* (2000), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Kalifornia* (1993), and *Raising Arizona* (1987) also feature characters that fit the stereotype of the dumb, criminal, sexually depraved white trash, indicating that negative representation of poor whites is still part of popular culture performances.

In *Peggy*, *Fixin's*, *The House of Connelly*, and *Tobacco Road*, the heroines are those women willing to conform to mainstream notions of femininity, becoming, in effect, "good girls." The performance of the white trash female

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play was made into the musical *My Fair Lady* in 1964.

stereotype through Dolly Parton's performance of Dolly Parton (1967-present), and Jennifer Reeder's video performance of White Trash Girl (1996, 1997) offer alternate possibilities. Both present characters and/or images that reject ideas of middle-class-assimilated behavior. Granted, Parton and Reeder do not acknowledge any awareness of the characters developed in the previously discussed plays of the 1920s and 1930s, but their use of stereotype at once rejects and accepts the images of white trash seen in these scripts and productions, suggesting that these representations have been fully integrated into American popular culture.

Parton and Reeder take the white trash stereotype and turn it on its head, refusing to take the bait of "good girl" salvation, while simultaneously representing good women who prevail over the evils of poverty and sexism. By claiming the label "white trash," both of these performers invoke the binary terror of white/trash. If binary terror surfaces, as Rebecca Schneider argues, with "the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self fashioning" in a way that is "directly proportionate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatus

of sense” (13), then Parton and Reeder’s work suggests the continued dominance of the sacred social binary that separates whiteness and poverty.

Parton, one of the most successful and adaptive musicians of the last four decades, promotes an engaging image and personality, relying heavily on her body’s almost unreal proportions to buttress public interest in her career. Chris Holmlund, in *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (2002), discusses Parton as the queen of “impossible body,” defined as stars whose “bodies were—and often still are—‘impossible’ because they exceed the parameters within which we think of ‘ideal’ or even ‘normal’ physiques” (4). Parton, in Holmlund’s view, is essential reading in American popular culture analysis, the “epitome of a timeless ‘South’ yet oddly ‘world,’ thoroughly ‘retro’ and quintessentially ‘pomo,’ with a nostalgic appeal that easily tippy toes over into camp” (12). Holmlund’s reading of Parton’s influence illuminates the star’s broad range of appeal; her use of the white trash stereotype touches a cord with a culture all too familiar with its usage and simultaneously challenges the power associated with that stereotype. Critical to Parton’s

success is her ability to play “white trash” for humor, while avoiding the scandals and gossip that plague many celebrities.

On the opposite end of mainstream palatability is video artist Jennifer Reeder’s series, *The Adventures of White Trash Girl*, based on a superhero whose most powerful weapons are natural elements of the female body. White Trash Girl has a southern twang, although she is not connected with any specific region, reinforcing the idea that white trash is always already rooted in stereotypes of the South. The White Trash Girl video series, created while Reeder was a graduate student at the Art Institute of Chicago, made Reeder an international name in art galleries.

The Adventures of White Trash Girl is explicit and violent, with graphic images of bodily functions and physical brutality. Reeder combines violence and sexuality to magnify stereotypical concepts of what white trash looks like and does with the intention of exploding those stereotypes. Reeder integrates film clips of explosions, bombs, and police footage to suggest destruction, with images of menstrual blood flowing from the uterus, feces

pushing through the intestines, vaginas ejaculating, and mouths spitting out mucus as visual reminders of what we either cannot or will not see.

Reeder employs her critique as defacement which, using Michael Taussig's analysis, literally "engages internally with the object defaced" (43) through her performance of desirable femininity. The defacement of that femininity occurs when she teases the public secrets of the body (menstrual blood, feces, oral and vaginal mucus) disrupting categories of desire and disgust. Through Reeder's acts of defacement she increases the power of the object defaced because she never fully reveals the public secret; her videos offer clinical views of internal sexual organs, but the external organs are only hinted at. This engagement with the public secret mirrors Taussig's view of defacement as an action which "brings insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery," but which may also "animate the thing defaced and the mystery revealed may become more mysterious"(3). *The Adventures of White Trash Girl* does not transform stereotypes and obscenities into commonplace cultural objects; instead Reeder injects these objects with superhuman power.

Parton and Reeder's performances, though not specifically theatrical, are significant as they simultaneously invoke and deface the white trash stereotype, and their work indicates the continued importance of the white/trash binary in American popular culture. With both women it is easy to be drawn into their physicality, but to do so misses the sharpness of their cultural commentaries. Parton and Reeder are able to manipulate the stereotype of poor white trash to their own ends, juxtaposing excessive female bodies with power based in a resistance to class biases. The explicit bodies of Parton and Reeder are feminist references to the explicit modes of binary terror that became part of American popular culture through the white trash female character of the 1920s and 1930s. It is not necessary to know these plays specifically to be familiar with the kinds of women they produced on stage, as they are reproduced continually through television, film, and stage performances. In many ways white culture continues to need the continuum of propriety that images of white trash are measured against.

John Waters' prediction of the death of the term white trash never came true. Perhaps because the idea of a

specific, stereotyped white trash, a representation able to stand for an entire class and race, points to the need for a white other, a mythical bad seed. As Harkins suggests, such stereotypes “contain multiple possible layers of meaning that divulge as much about the ‘mainstream’ culture as the groups and customs they ostensibly depict” (211). The position of poor white rural southern women in this amalgamation of class, region, race, and gender is one of uncertainty, as stereotypes of white trash women shift between notions of salvation and degradation. What these representations do provide is a view of how, historically, theatrical stages have reflected both regional and national perceptions of “others” within the white majority, altering definitions of racial, gender, and class-based identity.

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