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Popular Entertainment and Constructions of Southern Identity:

How Burlesques, Medicine Shows, and Musical Theatre

Made Meaning and Money in the South, 1854-1980

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**Popular Entertainment and Constructions of Southern Identity:
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Made Meaning and Money in the South, 1854-1980**

by

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Dissertation

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“the past is never dead, it isn’t even past”

– William Faulkner

““Jesus, the South is fine, isn’t it. It’s better than the theatre, isn’t it. It’s better than Ben Hur, isn’t it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn’t it”

– William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (176)

“You give this country twenty or thirty more years, everybody’s got any sense is going down South” – Pitcher Satchel Page

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Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, popular entertainments thrilled audiences throughout the United States, using a variety of techniques to encourage their potential audiences to part with their hard earned money. Rather than simply being a commercial exchange, attendance at a popular entertainment such as melodrama, circus, burlesque, or musical theatre often placed that individual in the midst of an active site of meaning making. This dissertation uses Modernity as a guiding historical, social, and cultural context to examine three specific performance events in three different Southern cities at three different historical periods to examine how popular theatricals provided a space for the discussion of what it means to be Southern. Looking at burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in New Orleans in the Summer of 1854, Medicine Shows in rural Appalachia in the 1920s and 30s, and the Atlanta stop on the first national tour of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* in January of 1980, illustrates how performance spaces

staged debates, documenting and contributing to changing notions of Southern identity. These shows offered depictions of Southern life that often placed older, stereotypical characterizations alongside increasingly nuanced or modern ones. In each of my three theatrical examples, Southern identity becomes a critical strategy or construct for audience members to use to navigate the space between the realities of their own existence in the South, the ever more modern world around them, and the mythic images of the South presented both onstage and in the popular media.

The time frame extends from 1854, the summer of three prominent burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in New Orleans that directly responded to the increasingly national phenomenon of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, to the 1920s and 30s, when Medicine Shows traveled throughout rural Appalachia trying to transform mountaineers into consumers using live performance and fake medicinal products, to 1980, when *Whorehouse* staged a debate between the Old and New South at The Fabulous Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. I conclude with an examination of the career trajectory of the Dixie Chicks and their recent troubles with identifying themselves as Southern.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Between the Mythic and the Mundane: Performing the Southern in Southern History	
Chapter One	36
Exorcising the Stage: Burlesques of <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> in New Orleans	
Chapter Two	82
"Appalachian Memories Keep Me Strong": Medicine Shows and the Marketing of Region	
Chapter Three	128
"Nothin' Dirty Goin' On": Or How Atlanta Found its Identity in a <i>Whorehouse</i>	
A Conclusion	177
"Taking the Long Way": Southern Identities and Popular Performance in the Twenty-first Century	
Bibliography	200
Vita	215

Introduction

Between the Mythic and the Mundane: Performing the Southern in Southern History

In his 1883 *Oddities in Southern Life and Character*, Editor Henry Watson begins his collection with a series of essays entitled “Georgia Scenes” by the Honorable Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, originally published in 1840. The first short piece, “Georgia Theatricals” tells of Judge Longstreet’s journey into the heart of the small Georgia town of Lincoln on June 10th, 1809. Upon arrival, Baldwin marvels at “all the charms of spring” filling the landscape: “vocal birds,” “sportive streams,” and “blushing flowers” (3). Yet almost immediately Baldwin overhears “loud, profane, and boisterous voices” cutting through the beauty of the pastoral scene and disrupting his peaceful stroll (3). He happens upon an argument between two boys that grows increasingly violent, quickly progressing from the exchange of words he “dare not even hint at” to “a short struggle” in which “the uppermost one made a heavy plunge with both his thumbs” to forcibly blind his foe (4). Taken aback, Baldwin stares at this violent altercation, eventually attracting the attention of those involved, and then proceeds to chastise the purported aggressor: “come back you brute” (4). The youths then disperse, assuring the judge of their innocence in the matter as

they run away. At this moment, Baldwin makes a remarkable discovery. What he witnessed was in fact not a public squabble but was rather the rehearsal of a play, “in which the youth[s] who had just left me had played the parts of the characters in a [dramatized] Courthouse fight” (5). Baldwin’s shift in perspective illustrates not simply a clever, comic anecdote of Southern life and character, but also demonstrates the everyday presence of performance in the Southern landscape. Baldwin’s story blurs the line between everyday Southern life and the many theatrical entertainments, such as this Courthouse play, which were happening throughout the region, and makes a case for the persistent, perpetual presence of performance, be it visible or invisible, in the Southern experience. It suggests the possible role performance might play in how a region identifies and contextualizes itself.

* * *

In this dissertation I use Modernity as a guiding historical, social, and cultural context to discuss how three popular theatrical productions – burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1854 New Orleans, medicine shows of the early twentieth century, and the 1978 musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* – staged Southern identity. In the act of staging, these performances simultaneously embodied both the idealized notions of the Old South and changing modern ideas of the New South. These popular theatrical presentations displayed the paradoxical nature of Modernity itself – a simultaneous investment in the past and dedication toward the future – and allowed Southerners of various genders, races, and classes to engage in debates over modernization, commercialization, and the national project of defining the region. For spectator and performer alike, performance provided an opportunity for reconstituting, maintaining,

and perhaps even abolishing their own (as well as collective) Southern identities. Locating popular performance as the site of Southern identity construction and preservation demonstrates the political potential of theatre and other cultural forms to spark public conversations. In addition, popular entertainments played an important role in the shifting ideologies of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This dissertation is divided into three body chapters plus a conclusion. In each chapter, I look at a popular theatrical form during a specific historical moment to see how Southern identity was enacted both onstage and within the audience. In chapter one, I argue that three burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Joseph M. Field's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or Life in the South as It Is*, Dr. William T. Leonard's *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana*, and George Jamison's *The Old Plantation; or, Uncle Tom As He Is* performed in New Orleans during the 1850s on the eve of the Civil War redefined what it meant to be Southern in response to Northern attempts to do so with a preponderance of Old South ideologies. Chapter two illustrates how medicine shows of the early twentieth century in Appalachia simultaneously staged the paradoxical elements of Modernity – the Old and New, the urban and the rural – through the constant juxtaposition of colorful stories appealing to nostalgic notions of the Old South with fabricated, manufactured, “new” products. Moreover, I argue that medicine shows incorporated the processes of commodification and packaging of the Old South into their performance strategies and thus demonstrated the advent of New South ideology for their Appalachian audiences. The third chapter demonstrates how the musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, which opened on Broadway in 1978 and subsequently toured the United States, and more specifically the Atlanta, Georgia premiere at the Fabulous Fox Theatre in January of

1980, represents Old South ideas in direct conflict with the New South philosophies. I argue that *Whorehouse* stages discussions that began in these burlesques and medicine shows including the desires to bolster Old South ideals and commodify the Old South to promote visions of the New South. In the conclusion, I focus on the career trajectory of The Dixie Chicks and discuss their particular performance strategies and the conversations they engage in with their audiences around Southern identity.

The primary subject matter of my research is popular theatrical traditions. The study of popular theatrical traditions encompasses a wide range of performance forms traditionally associated with commercial appeal and financial gain. Robert C. Toll, in *On With the Show: The First Century of Show Business in America* (1976), provides one of the few historical treatments of popular theatrical entertainments: “Before mass media pervaded the nation, average Americans crammed into theatres, auditoriums, halls, and tents to get their excitement, adventure, and escapism from live performers” (ii). For Toll, and for me, popular theatrical entertainments include various performance forms such as melodrama, circus, medicine shows, minstrelsy, Wild West shows, vaudeville, burlesque, and musicals. Unlike most nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre, popular theatrical entertainments might take place in a variety of spaces outside of a traditional theatrical space, in a tent, a field, a hall, or an auditorium. Moreover, people came in large numbers to see these performances, filling these spaces and demanding long runs and extended tours. Toll highlights the important elements of “excitement, adventure, and escapism,” key ingredients in creating performance experiences that placed the audience in an active relationship with the performers as opposed to the often passive configuration of spectator/actor in traditional theatrical performance spaces (ii).

Toll also emphasizes their “educational” value (ii). While some scholars frequently write off such entertainments as mere fluff or unworthy of critical attention, Toll argues that popular theatrical entertainments “developed [their] forms, features, styles, and material out of [their] intimate relationship with [their] audiences. As [they] entertained, [they] reflected and spoke to [their] patrons’ deepest concerns, desires, and needs” (ii). A perceived lack of seriousness meant that these shows “could deal with the most serious, most troubling subjects without threatening or irritating anyone” (ii). The shows dealt with subjects as diverse and socially significant as miscegenation, racism, lynching, sexuality, gender equality, and sanitation. For example, both Dion Bouccicault’s melodrama *The Octoroon* and Kern and Hammerstein’s musical *Show Boat* deal with miscegenation and racism. William Henry Smith’s melodrama *The Drunkard* deals with sanitation and factory conditions. The circus, as documented in Janet Davis’s *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the Big Top* (2002), often dealt with issues of gender and sexuality through female daredevil acts and the sideshow. Like Toll, I see popular theatrical entertainments like the burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in New Orleans in the 1850s, traveling medicine shows of the early nineteenth teens, and the 1978 musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* as sites of active engagement with social concerns. These performances, like all popular entertainments, participated in debates over cultural elitism, attracted audiences from diverse economic backgrounds, and, like the press occasionally did, encouraged and circulated popular discourse on cultural tastes and practices.

Historians Eric Lott, Charlotte Canning, and Gavin James Campbell provide useful models for talking about popular theatrical performance as an active space of

meaning making. In his 1993 book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Lott uses minstrel performance to construct a larger argument about how blackface performance in New York City prior to the Civil War assisted the formation of a white working class identity. Lott's methodologies and his mixture of close readings and performance reconstruction provides a critical model for me. His insistence on "reorient[ing] the traditions of American Studies by asking questions about the role of culture in the political development of a specific national entity" positions the theatrical space as an active source for the generating of discourse (11).

Similar to Lott, Charlotte Canning's *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (2005) locates the Chautauqua performance space as one of active meaning making. For Canning, Chautauqua audiences actively engaged in constructing identity: "Collectively they performed America, their reactions and responses taken by those observing them as proof that the nation was interested in, responsive to, and concerned about their mutual circumstances" (39). Although Canning's Chautauqua audiences primarily constructed American or National identities, her configuration of the performance space as one where "citizenship" was actively constructed and reconstructed remains useful when talking about Southern identity. Moreover, Canning's use of performance theory to discuss a form often "marginalized in theater and performance history" resonates with my treatments of two other frequently overlooked and under-theorized performance traditions – burlesque and medicine shows (4).

While Lott and Canning focus primarily on identity construction and preservation in Northern, popular performance, Gavin James Campbell's *Music and the Making of a*

New South locates Southern identity within a range of Southern performances.

Campbell's work concentrates on how both musical and theatrical performance – such as the annual Atlanta productions of the New York Metropolitan Opera Company at the beginning of the twentieth century – shaped identity within the New South. As Campbell states, the opera “supplied the tune for a complex and sometimes macabre minuet between gender and race that only intensified after the Metropolitan Opera returned to New York” (65). Throughout the book, the opera is configured as a contentious, active site of identity (re)formation where audiences confronted the “sorting out of gender roles,” the promotion of Atlanta and the South, debates over the “place of blacks,” and numerous other class related issues (15-16). Campbells' location of these activities within performance spaces provides a useful model for locating Southern meaning making within the audience space.

Throughout this project, I will rely on concepts of Modernity to provide a basic framework for my argument. Modernity, according to Patrizia C. McBride in *Legacies of Modernism* (2007), is “broadly defined as a confluence of social and economic processes harnessed by an ideology of progress, secularization, and emancipation, whose mature formulation surfaced in the Enlightenment” (2). McBride continues to argue that “according to this narrative, modernity is haunted by an acute sense of crisis, which grows out of the awareness that the modern period had conspicuously strayed from the goals and values that secured its legitimization” (2). While this sense of crisis resulted in numerous artistic movements throughout Europe under the name of modernism, in the United States South, I argue that popular entertainments became a primary location where potential crises of Modernity could play out onstage. For the South primarily,

issues of race beginning with slavery and continuing through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement signaled potential crises as racism “strayed from the goals and values” of “emancipation” that was one of the tenets of Modernity and the Enlightenment.

Historians, such as David Goldfield (*Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South*) and Ted Ownby (*American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, & Culture, 1830-1998*), when speaking of Modernity in terms of the South generally refer to a historical period occurring from the nineteenth through the middle of the twentieth century that marks a moment of collective forgetting and re-imaging wherein a push for nostalgia replaces “actual” history. The loss of the Civil War and the aftermath of Reconstruction most often mark the beginning of these two concomitant processes, political maneuvers to rework and rewrite history through myth. A concern for the present moment is replaced by a simultaneous longing for a past and desire for the future reflected in the increase in mythologizing and the blurring of history and myth.

Modernization emerges as the material practice of Modernity – translating the ideas into tangible processes. This period is marked by increased urbanization as people leave rural areas for opportunities within cities and by a growth in technology as industrialization feeds commercialization and encourages ideals of progress. Tensions emerge between old and new, rural and urban. These tensions never neatly resolve themselves and eventually come to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the historical period – a period that refuses to be grounded in the present, a period in flux.

Although Modernity typically gets associated with this specific historical period of the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century, the tensions of Modernity and the various forces present therein influence the entirety of my project. Within my three case

studies, the theatrical stage is a location where these tensions of Modernity, primarily expressed through encounters with the material process of modernization, are enacted for a live audience. Within the moment of performance, audiences actively engage with these opposing forces and reconstitute their own, albeit always necessarily temporary, Southern identities in relation to the issues expressed and forces presented before them on the stage. Each event already imagines their audience as essentially Southern and thus able to participate in such work around identity. I am interested in what the temporary, constantly changing nature of these identity constructions says about the specific Southern experience. How might we make sense of the trajectory of Southern identity like Bill Monroe and David Stricklin offer in their introduction to *Southern Music/American Music* (2003): “The lazy South bows to the booster South; the genteel South wars with the violent South; the rural South recedes before the urban-industrial South; the solid Democratic South gives way to the Republican South” (1)? Is this experience of shifting identifications specifically a Southern one or are their corollaries in other regional identity constructions? Moreover, how and why does theatre, as opposed to cinema, radio, or television, provide the desired medium for expressing the tensions of Modernity and showcasing the struggles of identity construction?

Within each chapter, I employ a number of methodologies to analyze these performances within the context of Modernity. I include a generalized reconstruction of each performance form, setting the scene for the exchanges of ideas and identities to illustrate the relationship between audience and performer. Complementing these reconstructions, I do close readings of the extant performance texts, focusing on any surviving dialogue, character descriptions, songs, or stage directions.

Bringing the reconstruction and the reading together, I will rely primarily on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field that

takes into consideration not only works themselves [the performances], seen relationally within the space of available possibilities and within historical development of such possibilities, but also producers of works in terms of their strategies and trajectories, based on their individual and class habitus, as well as their objective position within the field. (Johnson 1-25)

The "field" (cultural field, political field, educational field, etc.) is defined as a "dynamic," "structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of those of politics and the economy, except, obviously, in the case of the economic and political fields" (6). The process of examining the work or performance then also necessitates an "analysis of the structure of the field itself" and "an analysis of the position of the field within the broader field of power" (9). Randall Johnson, Bourdieu's editor, helpfully calls this process "radical contextualization" and summarizes it as an analytical method encompassing "the set of social conditions of the production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic goods" (9). I argue that Southern identity becomes the product or goods of these popular entertainments. Bourdieu's model provides me with a basic groundwork to execute an in-depth analysis of the moment of performance and the multiple exchanges occurring therein. Moreover, Bourdieu's theories allow me a way of discussing the relationship between Modernity and the changing dimensions of the Southern experience. Speaking of identity as a cultural product, a result of a series of social, economic, and political processes within a

specific cultural field (the South), locates identity construction within the project of modernization and within the periodization of Modernity.

The South has been defined in a variety of ways, geographically and ideologically, most often based upon political, economic, and social conditions occurring throughout the entire nation. The Colonial South, comprised of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, referred both to the geographical region and their primary function as the agrarian center of the newly forming nation, providing the crucial cash crops of tobacco and cotton. Despite the fact that most Southerners of the time would not have referred to themselves as such preferring the moniker of their home colony (Virginians, Carolinians, etc.), the idea of the region's distinctive character as "a minority in an American union dominated by a Northern majority" (Alden 4) was already circulating through pamphlets, books, and letters such as Robert Beverley's *History and the Present State of Virginia* (1705) and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) (Hobson 19-20). The American Revolution quieted such discussions of regional difference though as the country unified to combat the English forces.

Following the ratification of the Constitution, the South's geographical boundaries as a region began to emerge alongside national debates over how to define and govern the new nation, chiefly through discussion of how to deal with the issue of slavery. When Congress passed the Missouri Compromise in 1820 allowing the Missouri Territory to enter the Union as a slave state and banning slavery north of the 36, 30 parallel in an attempt to appease both anti-slavery and pro-slavery factions, the nation was divided into two distinct regions. The Mason-Dixon line (along the 36, 30 parallel), an old line established by the British during the colonial period to settle a boundary

dispute between Maryland and Pennsylvania, became the symbolic division between “free states” and “slave states” and demarcated what historian Fred Hobson in *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (1983), called “a community of spirit rather than individual political units and state allegiances” (20). The regional divisions exposed through this governmental action were mostly sustained through the Civil War.

Compiling a list of those states that fought on the side of the Confederacy is still perhaps the most common method of delineating the South from the rest of the nation. Under this conception of the region, the South is comprised of: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas in addition to the “border” states of Kentucky and Missouri. While most understandings of the South today eliminate Missouri and some add West Virginia, this grouping of states represents the contemporary geographical composition of the region, one forged out of sectional conflict and the deplorable institution of slavery. Groups such as the Southern Agrarians, who published their manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) in the midst of The Great Depression which called for Southern intellectuals to bring “separate groups of Southern thought together” to provide “a counter-influence and check to megalopolitanism” that threatened to disband the region, helped maintain these geographical boundaries despite frequent challenges from inside and outside the South (qtd. in Dorman 110). As Hobson states in the introduction to his anthology *South to the Future: An American Region in the Twenty-first Century* (2002), “we have witnessed over this past century and a half a sort of sliding South, as Dixie has moved, through time, farther south and west” (12).

Texas, the subject and setting of *Whorehouse*, my third case study, presents a particular challenge to any attempt to define the South as a coherent region. Celeste Ray, in *Southern Heritage on Display: Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity with Southern Regionalism* (2003), highlights “the ambivalence of Texans [to] defin[e] themselves as part of the South or as part of the Southwest” and their preference instead to emphasize their independence evidenced in their state nickname, the Lone Star State. Yet Texas’s inclusion in the Confederacy, its predominantly agrarian economy (cotton, etc.), and the fact that most of its residents migrated west from the South challenged these separatist impulses (Smith 150). In an 1887 speech entitled “The South and Her Problems” delivered at the Texas State Fair in Dallas, Henry Grady, who coined the term New South, included Texas as a vibrant, prosperous part of the South. He praised the region for its contributions to a burgeoning Southern economy through its profitable cotton and coal industries. His rhetoric moreover stressed the importance of the state in his grand vision of the region’s future and he drew comparisons between the Civil War and the Alamo:

It is the spirit of the Alamo that moved above the Texas soldiers as they charged like demigods through a thousand battlefields . . . In the spirit of this inspiration and in the thrill of this amazing growth that surrounds you, my young friends, it will be strange if the young men of Texas do not carry the lone star into the heart of the struggle. (84)

Grady’s charge aligns the plight of Texas with the plight of the entire South, links their fates together as a unified region with similar goals, and brings them into the geographical fold of the demarcated South.

Myth circulates throughout Southern history as a means of making sense of Southern experience and, in turn, Southern identity. As Mark Schorer states in “The Necessity of Myth,” myths are “large, controlling images that give philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life” and function as “instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experiences intelligible to ourselves” thus providing an “organizing value for experience” (355). Myth’s power to arrange and systematize rebukes the often chaotic nature of lived experience and, as Phillip Wheelwright has offered, keeps the “haunting awareness of transcendental forces peering through the cracks of the visible universe” from ripping wide open (qtd. in Schorer 355).

Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, while agreeing in theory with Schorer’s claims for the societal necessity of myth, provides a slightly different, more useful understanding, which focuses on myth as both a type of speech and semiological system. Myth, for Barthes, is “a mode of signification” defined by “the way it utters” its “message” rather than by the message itself (113). As a semiological system, myth is comprised of three parts – the signifier, the signified, and the sign – yet it is what Barthes calls “a second-order semiological system,” meaning that what is the sign in the first system becomes a signifier in the second (114). For example, the objects included in mythical expression – photographs, posters, films, *Whorehouse* playbills, Medicine Show advertisements, etc. – while singular objects initially with their own signifying systems are “reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth” and grouped together thus losing their specific, individual meanings (114). Thus a Confederate flag may have its own semiological system signifying Southern pride or the Civil War but once it becomes attached to the myth of the Old South it becomes one of many signifiers for that larger

mythology. Furthermore, like Schorer, Barthes emphasizes the importance of the distance between the visible, overarching facade of the myth itself and the underlying meaning calling it “a constant game of hide-and-seek” that is only complicated by myth’s unstable nature and myth’s function “to distort, not to make disappear” (118, 121). For myth remains forever unfixed: “they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (120).

Barthes contends that in the processes of receiving myth, individuals can read them in three different ways – one focusing on meaning, one on form, and another on both. The first two, he argues, “destroy the myth, either by making its intention obvious, or by unmasking it,” while the third “consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure” understanding “the myth as a story at once true and unreal” (128). This process of myth making and myth reception ultimately “transforms history into nature” removing specificity and political language and replacing it with innocuous and “innocent speech” in an attempt to promote collectivity and shared understanding (129, 142, 131). Thus myth becomes not just a means of making sense of experience but also a powerful political and ideological tool to unite disparate groups of people together behind common causes or ideologies.

Looking at myth in relation to performance confirms Barthes’s conception. Performance allows myth both to make collective its often individual, “imperative, buttonholing character” and to unfreeze its “frozen speech” and resist the moment when, as Barthes relates, myth “suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality, stiffens,” and “makes itself look neutral and innocent” (124, 125).

Performance activates the mythology and fosters the embodiment of the conceptual and

ideological. Myth ultimately resides within the realm of the theatrical. Its survival depends on its constant reperformance. When confronted with the question of “What is the art form of the myth?,” Jerome S. Bruner replies that “principally it is drama” in that myth, like drama, “lives on the feather line between fantasy and reality” (279). Bruner links his conception of myth directly with identity formation speaking of the potential of myth to provide “the basis for a sharing of inner experience” that links directly to a larger shared ethos (286). Drama fosters the physical manifestation of these processes and exhibits the dual nature of myth itself as both “an externalization” and “a pedagogical image” (279). Those myths cherished, enacted and dramatized by communities, then, like Barthes’s examples of wrestling or the brain of Einstein, in turn, “provide the models and the programs” through which “the internal cast of identities is molded and enspirited” (286). Through the processes of rehearsal and performance, communities continually determine the relevance of these myths to the “internal plights of those who require them” (286). When they deem these myths no longer pertinent, theatre then fosters “the transition to newly created myths” that “may take the form of a chaotic voyage into the interior” (286). Through live performance, myth gets constituted and enacted while audience members likewise reconstitute and reenact their own identities in relation to what they witness onstage and in the theatre around them.

Live performance provides a venue for the spread of myth and both supports and challenges the traditional flow of information via newspaper, radio, television, and other media throughout a given society. As communication theorists Melvin L. DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach offer in their concept of myth as a mass communicated message, myth “can be used to provide individuals with new and seemingly group supported

interpretations – social constructions of reality – regarding some phenomenon toward which they are acting” (qtd. in Smith 139). In turn, these mass communicated mythologies then might “mediate the conduct of individuals as they derive definitions of appropriate behavior and belief from suggested interpretations communicated to them” (qtd. in Smith 139). Mass media though often fails to contain, control, or even contest mythology. As Paul M. Gaston states in *The New Southern Creed: A Study in Southern Myth Making*, myths “are something more than advertising slogans and propaganda ploys connected to a specific purpose” (223). Myths possess a power that “permeates the thought” creating “mental sets which do not ordinarily yield to intellectual attacks” (223). Theatre and live performance can provide one of the few locations, short of violent outburst or tragedy, for debunking and debating myths, as myth “may be penetrated by rational analysis only as the consequence of dramatic, or even traumatic, alterations in society whose essence they exist to portray” (224). Live performance can showcase the tensions between the “mythic view and the reality,” rehearse the “snap” of the “viability of their relationship,” and stage the creation of “new social patterns and with them new harmonizing myth” (224). Theatre thus becomes an ideal site for the staging of the complex relationship between Southern mythology and history.

Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), provides a useful method for talking about the ephemeral nature of both myth and performance. Stewart’s work focuses on the material objects, the remnants, left behind after an event or experience. For Stewart, nostalgia results from “a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that necessarily is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience” (23). Individuals use

souvenirs and keepsakes as a desperate attempt to ward off that sense of longing and “move history into private time” making the past present within the object itself (138). Her argument, that souvenirs have “a double function . . . to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” speaks of the relationship between the object and mythology. In her estimation, the object contains and propagates the mythology. For example, the advertising cards an audience member took home from any given Medicine Show forever located that live experience in the past and perpetuated the nostalgia through myth for a return to that desired time now gone. Since I am focusing on three performances where little physical material remains, those objects that do survive take on added meaning and significance. Stewart’s work helps me to relate those objects to their larger Southern histories and Southern mythologies.

In the South, myth exists alongside history creating what historian David Potter has termed the notion of the South as “an enigma” or “a kind of Sphinx on the American land” (142). While “the South is not necessarily richer in history than other American regions,” as Steven Hoelscher reminds in “Displaying Heritage in Natchez Mississippi” (2003), “it has often become the figurative and literal battleground over questions of the past and who controls its interpretation” in part due to the unusual relationship between its myth and its history (227). As Edward L. Ayers states in his essay “What We Talk about When We Talk about the South” (1996), “People realize that when they speak of ‘Southern culture’ they are creating a fiction, a fiction of a geographically bounded and coherent set of attributes to be set off against a mythical non-South” (65). While myth provides an organizing structure for public memory and a means for relating the past to personal experience, its historical value lies beneath its veneer, within its origins and

circulation, not simply in the myth itself. And since Southern history, as Potter claims, “more than most branches of historical study, seems to point up the anomalous relationships between the past, or our image or legend of the past, and the present, or our image of the present,” historicizing the myth, breaking it into its component parts, and understanding the various forces around its creation, dispersal, and maintenance becomes even more integral in the processes of Southern historical inquiry (qtd. in Gerster & Cords 44). As famed Southern historian George B. Tindall has remarked, “The idea of the South – or more appropriately, the ideas of the South – belong in large part to the order of social myth” (22). Throughout the history of the South, myths like the Southern lady (a gentile, refined, corseted Belle), the Lost Cause (a rallying cry for a return to the antebellum South), and the New South (a re-branding of the region as a center of modernization, industrial growth, and sophistication) have been employed to encapsulate Southern experiences and make sense of events such as the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, initially, few historians undertook the project of historicizing the processes of mythologizing and instead treated myth as history, failing to heed the warning of theorists like Barthes; examining Southern myth was left for writers such as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. Changing ideas in the writing of Southern history promoted in the late 1960s and early 1970s by historians such as Tindall (“Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History” and *The Ethnic Southerner*), Paul M. Gaston (*The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Myth Making*), and David M. Potter (“The Enigma of the South”) called for a reexamination of Southern myth as a means through which to understand Southern history. They contended that historians

have been looking in the wrong places, that they have failed to seek the key to the enigma where the poets so readily found it – in the mythology that has had so much to do with shaping character, unifying society, developing a sense of community, or common ideals and shared goals, making the region conscious of its distinctiveness (Tindall 42).

Gaston adds that in avoiding myth in historical analysis, historians have “produced a lush and stimulating interpretive literature designed to identify a central theme or themes of Southern history” that remains limited in scope and, in fact, participated in creating “interpretations that have become little myths themselves” (9). The historian, as Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords remind in their introduction to Tindall’s essay in their collection *Myth and Southern History*, must be both a “custodian of the past and keeper of the public memory” (1).

Understanding the relationship between myth and Southern history affords multiple new understandings of the Southern experience and, in turn, Southern identity. The predominance of myth in the history of the South, a result of individuals trying to make sense of the legacies of slavery, the antebellum south, and the loss of The Civil War, indicates for many of these later Southern historians the presence of distinguishing Southern characteristics. Tindall surmises that perhaps “since the Southern mind is reputed to be peculiarly resistant to pure abstraction and more receptive to the concrete and dramatic image, it may be unusually susceptible to mythology” (23). While Tindall’s statement is obviously reductive, his sentiment reveals an underlying belief in the South’s distinctive nature, found both within and outside the region, as set apart from the rest of the country and even the world. Tindall provides a laundry list of mythologies that

indicates the various ways the region and those outside has strived to distinguish the South through its myth:

the proslavery South, the Confederate South, the demagogic South, the state's right's South, the fighting South, the lazy South, the folklore South, the South of jazz and blues, the booster South, the rapacious South running away northern business, the liberal South of the interracial movement, the white supremacy South of racial segregation, which seems to be for some the all-encompassing 'Southern way of life,' the Anglo-Saxon South, the most American of all regions because of its native population (35)

As this list shows, Southern myth can be both positive and negative and can both attempt to promote the region as progressive or modern (New South) or denigrate the region as backward or troubled (Racist or Lazy South). Brandt Ayers, a major proponent of the New South, cautions that "a viral weed of mythology has been allowed to grow like kudzu over the South, made up of oratory at so many Confederate Memorial Days, of so many Confederate flags waved by college undergraduates" (qtd. in Smith 4). Ayer's words indicate the power of mythology and its more sinister abilities to cast the South in a negative light. Similarly, the myth of Southern womanhood, Sara M. Evans argues, distorts the realities of the lives of actual Southern women as "few Southern women actually lived the life of the lady or fully embodied her essential qualities: innocence, modesty, morality, piousness, delicacy, self-sacrificial devotion to family, and . . . whiteness" (150). The myth, in this instance, places unrealistic expectations upon 'real'

women and compels those women to construct their own identities in relation to those dominant images.

So although Gaston states in *The New South Creed*, that “Southerners have shared experiences and circumstances which seem to make it natural, perhaps necessary, for their memories, new ideas, and aspirations to be arranged and to fit coherently in some concept of Southernness,” the specifics of those identities remain diverse in the face of dominant mythologies (6). Thus the processes of myth making directly relate to the processes of identity formation in that the organizing structure of myth aids the individual’s understanding of themselves in relationship to their own experience and environment. Southern identities then emerge and change along with and in opposition to the rise and fall of Southern myths.

In each of my three theatrical examples, Southern identity becomes a critical strategy or construct for audience members to use to navigate the space between the realities of his or her own existence in the South and the mythic images of the South presented both onstage and in the popular imagination and media. The space of identity construction and reconstruction allows audience members to constantly reconfigure what it means to be Southern in relation to changes in his or her everyday realities and shifts in Southern mythology. Focusing on the process of identity formation and how each of these three performance events provides a space for those processes positions popular entertainments as a crucial location for the transmission of social ideologies and for the formation, maintenance, and destruction not just of identities but of mythologies. In creating these spaces of potential audience engagement, theatre participates in the

circulation of ideas of what it means to be Southern and of myths that attempt to cast the South in a variety of roles from Sunbelt to Nostalgic to the Agrarian to the “New.”

Pinning down an exact definition of Southern identity proves difficult. After all, as Ayers states, “The South is continually coming into being, continually being remade, continually struggling with its pasts” (Ayers 82). Attempts to codify its meaning such as James C. Cobb’s *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (2006) illustrate the complexities of such a project. Cobb alternately defines Southern identity as equal to Southern distinctiveness, “a distinctive regional identity defined in contrast to the North,” a common sense of a shared past, and “the product of common suffering” (1-8). Cobb’s efforts result in what reviewer Jane Dailey calls “an inability to clarify just what is meant by the phrase ‘Southern identity’ (2).

Rather than resorting to a string of vague definitions, I configure Southern identity as a process, intrinsically linked to the processes of defining the South itself. Southern identity then, as Jan Nordby Gretlund argues in *The Southern State of Mind* (1999), “is forever in the making,” and becomes an ever-changing series of identities that strive to capture the collective definitions and shared beliefs of those living in and identifying with the geographical region known as the South. What it means to be a Southerner then, to borrow from Larry L. Griffin’s article “The American South and the Self” (2006), is

a complex and historically shifting consequence of [the] imposition of laws, images, stereotypes, and the like by powerful forces in the public arena (such as military victors, political majorities, the federal government, and the media), negotiation of meaning among Southerners

and between Southerners and others, and cultural appropriation, whereby a debased label associated with "Southernness," such as "redneck" or "hillbilly," is transmuted from a mark of stigma to one of pride by those who are so labeled. (2)

Additionally, why an individual decides to identify with one of these larger, collective Southern identities “is a function of choices they make – choices, however constrained by biography, perception of the region and its inhabitants, and social interactions, with some Southerners arguably having greater latitude in their self-definitions than others (Griffin 2). Thus the process of defining and maintaining Southern identity exists simultaneously on the level of the individual and the collective with identity the way to make sense of and relate to larger ideas, concepts or mythologies. For example, when confronted with the image of an inbred child playing the banjo alongside the Chattahoochee River in the film *Deliverance*, the Southern individual may or may not choose to identify with the representation based upon his or her own personal history, opinions, or experiences. Southern identity is defined through these processes on both the individual and collective level that result in an understanding of what it means to be Southern.

Any definition of Southern identity must also account for the role of memory. W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s edited anthology, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (2000), locates Southern identity as the result of a social history of collective memory in the South from the antebellum period to the present day that stresses the ideas of memory and remembering. Brundage states in his introduction, that “rather than treating social memory as a periodically salient element of history--say, as a symptom of dislocation or anxiety” he considers “memory a central and enduring feature

of the human condition” (25-26). Like Brundage, I want to position memory as central to my understanding of Southern identity formation and locate it as one of the primary ways in which an individual constructs his or her own Southern identity in relation to the collective definitions offered via popular theatricals.

Louis Althusser’s theories of ideology and interpellation provide useful methods for describing the various ways Southern identities get employed specifically in popular entertainments. As each of these identities gets formed on the collective level, they do ideological work, creating “imaginary relationship[s] of individuals to their real conditions of existence” similar in many ways to the work of mythologizing (1478). These identities then, according to Althusser, “hail or interpellate” individuals “recruiting them” as or “transforming” them into subjects (1504). In a theatrical context, the subjects become audience. Each performance calls up different ideas and representations of Southerness and in turn the audience is hailed or not by what they see on stage. Key to Althusser’s theory is that even though the audience has the illusion of choice, the “ideology has always-already interpellated” the individual as a subject (1504). The commercial nature of popular theatre illustrates this point for in the act of purchasing or not purchasing the ticket the audience member has already been hailed and constructed as the subject – a mechanism within a larger economic system – even before the show even begins. Althusser’s understanding of ideological work helps to explicate the myriad processes of identification occurring during any given theatrical performance and situates commercial, popular entertainments as a particularly rich locations for the work of identity formation.

Judith Butler's work provides a useful means for thinking about the nature of identity construction itself and the ways in which performance provides an opportunity for identity negotiation and formation within and around an active audience. Butler's theories of gender performativity provide a useful model here for thinking about identity formation in general. As Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, "gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (140). In the case of Southern identity, each identity only exists through its constant performance and a general acceptance of its validity. Once the collective experience, expressed through myth, changes, the identity must, in turn, change in accordance to the new parameters set out by the new agreement or, in this case, myth. For example, the Civil Rights Movement marked a dramatic shift in the way many Southerners dealt with race. As a result of this collective experience, mythologized through the images of the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Birmingham March, individuals had to adjust their identities in relation to this new information – reinforcing their racist beliefs, abandoning past prejudices, etc.. As in Butler's understanding of gender construction, this process of identification remains mostly hidden as an internal process masked by the naturalness of the identity. Likewise, the desire to maintain Southern distinctiveness, always necessarily separate from some fictional other, remains a vital component. The punishment for failure to comply with the parameters is the denial of Southernness, of identity and region.

In addition to Butler and Althusser's work, Pete Daniel and Tara McPherson both provide useful methods for linking the role of entertainments and leisure activity to Southern identity formation. These authors see popular entertainments as evidence of Southern identity formation, which provides functional models for my own analysis. Pete Daniel in *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* positions a variety of entertainment forms ranging from Elvis and rock n' roll music to stock car racing as the response of working-class culture, or "lowdown culture," to "the collision between rural and urban cultures" (1). Daniel speaks usefully of the interplay between class and culture and gestures toward a larger conversation over the commercialization of these entertainments and the ultimate affect of that on these forms' political efficacy (174-75). These entertainment forms provided working-class audiences locations for social interaction and rebellion against dominate political power structures. Tara McPherson's *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* makes an important scholarly intervention that concentrates specifically on the media and its many interrelated parts including film, television, fiction, popular journalism, music, tourist sites, the internet, and autobiography. I, like McPherson, position the media as a potent force within contemporary society that constructs and disseminates images that endorse specific ways of reading gender, race, and place within a Southern context. McPherson ultimately sees the media, just as I see these often itinerant popular performances, as a mobile, active system of signs that influences identity formations, reinforces already constructed identities, and stages tensions between Southern identities, race, and gender both within and outside of the South (35).

Similarly, Allison Graham's *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* supplies me with a model for considering performance that borrows from analysis of film and television images as active rather than passive forms that simultaneously create and reflect changing notions of the Southern region and race and, in turn, identity. Complicating understandings of film and television as "mere 'reflections' of social trends," Graham understands the media to be an "active participant in the political arena" (17). Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin in *Southern Music/American Music* consider the legacy of the South in the history of popular music performance, like the popular minstrel songs incorporated in the burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in Medicine Shows throughout the South. Malone and Stricklin argue that changes in popular music reflected and paralleled the South's rise in national prominence, "a process in which the region became more like the country and the country became more like the South" (3). Popular American music becomes synonymous with Southern music and the South, in turn, becomes, through this narrative, an area of creation for the rest of the country. As opposed to previous historical treatments that discuss popular entertainments as central only to Southerners for identity formation and maintenance or that deal with Northern entertainment's conceptions of Southerners, Malone and Stricklin present these popular, distinctly Southern music forms as national ones that spread Southern ideologies and mythologies.

One of the predominant tensions of the Southern experience in the twentieth century, present in the time of each of the three performances and poised to bring about the rejection of Southern identity was modernization, a term used to describe the material processes of Modernity. Modernization endangered established ways of Southern life

while at the same time promising to usher in a new era of economic prosperity and national recognition. While some Southerners rallied around Henry W. Grady's New South mythology, others feared the loss of a Southern identity all together. Writers, like Harry Ashmore in *Epitaph for Dixie* (1958) and John Egerton in *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southerization of America* (1974), decried a perceived depletion and saturation of Southern identity in an attempt to sync up with a more national ethos. C. Vann Woodward, for example, in *The Burden of South History* (1960), declares that "the modern Southerner should be secure enough in his national identity to escape the compulsion of less secure minorities to embrace uncritically all the myths of nationalism . . . and should be secure enough not to deny a regional heritage because it is a variance with national myth" (25). Similarly, Charles P. Roland in "The Ever-Vanishing South" (1982), assures that "there is cause to believe the region's unique combination of political, religious, cultural, ethnic, and social traits, reinforced as they are by geography and history, myth and folklore, and convention and inertia, will for a good while yet keep it distinctive" (20). The constant rush toward the new throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century bolstered by modernization and embodied in the continually recycled rhetoric of the New South coupled with a ever strengthening desire to remember the past through myth, forced the region to undergo continual reexaminations of its own identity, as editor Edgar Thompson states in his intro to *Perspectives on the South: Agenda for Research*, "each 'New South' has raised new problems and new questions, but not always new answers" (xi).

Yet more recent scholarship has addressed this tension and directly confronted claims like that put forward in Hodding Carter III's 1990 *Time* Magazine piece entitled

“The End of the South” wherein he declares “the South that was is dead, and the South some had hoped would take its place never grew out of the cradle of old dreams” and in its place what “lurches into existence . . . is purely and contemporaneously mainstream American” (1). Historians, like Jan Norby Gretland, countered such claims by illustrating the fact that “Southern identity, the Southernness of a multilayered culture, is forever in the making,” a continual, ongoing process (vii). Others like James C. Cobb offer that the history of Southern identity “is not a story of continuity *versus* change, but continuity *within* it” (7). To truly comprehend Southern identity, one must understand the historical circumstances of the moment and not view change as the enemy for identity formation itself is a constantly shifting process. As George Tindall writes in his introduction to *The Ethnic Southerner*, “we learn time and time again from the Southern past and the history of others that to change is not necessarily to disappear . . . and we learn from modern psychology that to change is not necessarily to lose one’s identity; to change, sometimes, is to find it” (21). Popular performance provided a venue where audiences might begin to make sense of these issues and ideologies and express their fears at the changes occurring around them in a public forum.

In approaching my three specific case studies – burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, medicine shows, and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* – I will rely both on primary materials and some foundational secondary texts that have shaped discussions around these various forms of popular entertainment. For my work on the burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, I use a number of archival collections. The Harry Ransom Center on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin has perhaps the largest single collection of materials relating to the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and its early theatrical adaptations. In

terms of the novel, the collection includes correspondence, original manuscripts of the novel, illustrations from the many publications of the novel, reviews and articles, as well as advertisements found in newspapers and popular journalism. Regarding the theatrical productions, the HRC has an extensive collection of early play scripts, including some of the revisions that occurred throughout the rehearsal process. The collection also includes a number of illustrations and photographs of the staging of the productions and a multitude of print advertising from newspapers and periodicals.

The University of Virginia also operates an amazing web archive entitled “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Culture*” that provides materials on both the novel and the theatrical adaptations. The archive provides texts referenced within the novel on Christianity, “sentimental culture,” anti-slavery treatises, and minstrelsy as well as more illustrations and literature on the Christian slave. Furthermore, the website offers a section of responses to the novel that includes American reviews, articles & notices (1852-1930), African American responses, Pro-slavery responses, and UTC as a children’s book. The archive also includes a section on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* onstage that includes scripts, images of performances, reviews, notices, newspaper ads, promptbooks, business records, playable recorded performances, articles, and a brief section of spin-offs and parodies. Also available through the archive is information on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on film, songs and poems relating to the story, and Tomitudes – or the commercial products that were created to capitalize off its success. I also consulted with the Tulane University Library in New Orleans which has an extensive collection of New Orleans newspapers and periodicals.

Thomas Gossett's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (1985) provides a basic framework for understanding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its numerous theatrical adaptations as a national phenomenon that circulated widely throughout the North and South and, though paradoxical in its ultimate message, affected the national consciousness concerning race. His work allows me to discuss burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* alongside both the original Harriet Beecher Stowe novel and the seminal George Aiken theatrical adaptation, as well as the subsequent dramatic versions penned in response to the first. Gossett traces the history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from idea to story to novel to play to film and focuses specifically on the revisions that occurred for each of these subsequent incarnations. Gossett's primary project is one of reclamation. He seeks to rescue Stowe's novel from literary scorn and sentimentality and champion it as a treatise on "political and social institutions" (ix). In this configuration, the theatrical adaptations, although they receive somewhat lengthy treatments, are deemed inferior to the novel since they dilute the antislavery theme by "pandering to popular taste" (367). Yet Gossett quickly cautions that one cannot completely write off the plays because, "perhaps as many as fifty people would eventually see *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the play, for everyone person who would read the novel" (260). Subsequent texts, like Linda Williams's *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*, pick up where Gossett leaves off and locate the preponderance of the images of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in later, twentieth century cultural forms. Works like Williams's, which traces the lingering effects of melodrama as an American structure of feeling, provides me important information as to how cultural artifacts like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and associated ideologies circulate across historical time.

When discussing traveling medicine show performances throughout the South in chapter two, I rely heavily on McNamara's 1975 *Step Right Up*. *Step Right Up* is the definitive history of the medicine show and proclaims the form "amazingly widespread and influential" (xx). McNamara's history traces the form from its European roots to its American incarnations and discusses its various performances of race, including its depictions of Native Americans and Asians. Most importantly, this book includes many interviews with actual medicine show performers compiled by the author. As many of these performers have since died, their stories captured within this history offer a vital, direct link to the form. Yet while this history offers detailed accounts of many of the personalities involved, the acts performed, and the products sold, it fails to really capture what these shows might have been like for the audience in attendance with little attention paid to the specifics of the performance spaces or audience configurations. It does include five scripts of medicine show sketches, but relies a great deal on historical figures like Mark Twain to provide commentary on audiences rather than including the voices of actual audience members themselves (184-206). I supplement McNamara's work with histories of Quackery and patent medicines such as James Harvey Young's *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in American before Federal Regulation* and Stewart Hall Holbrook's *The Golden Age of Quackery* and other medicine show studies including Ann Anderson's *Snake Oil, Hustlers, and Hambones: The American Medicine Show*. I also use the memoir of Violet McNeal, a famed female medicine show performer, entitled *Four White Horses and a Brass Band*.

My primary research on *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* was mostly conducted at Texas State University where the papers of Larry L. King, book writer and

author of the original *Playboy* article, are kept. Within this collection are King's works (including books, plays, articles, short stories, television, songs, and speeches), materials about King, and his personal correspondence. Of particular interest, the collection contains the 1974 *Playboy* article on which *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* is based as well as scripts, sheet music, screenplay drafts, a playbook, playbills, posters, flyers, reviews, clippings, photographs, tickets, T-shirts, a jacket, promotional buttons, congratulations and a 1981 cartoon by Patrick Oliphant drawn on a napkin.

To discuss the work *Whorehouse* does in debating Southern identities, I must contextualize the musical within the larger history of the form to get a sense of the show's reception and influence. Musical theatre, on the whole, has received relatively little scholarly attention, given its immense popularity throughout the twentieth century. Not until the past ten or twenty years have theatre and music scholars taken on musical theatre as a location for serious scholarship as in Stacy Wolf's *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (2002), William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird's *The Cambridge Guide to the Musical* (2002), or John Bush Jones's *Our Musicals Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (2003). Even within this recent scholarship, few mention *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* apart from brief references to its choreographer Tommy Tune or entries in a list of the best featured actor and actress Tony Award winners of 1979. Due to this lack of critical scholarship, the authoritative text on the musical's production process is Larry L. King's *The Whorehouse Papers*. King, credited as one of the show's book writers and the author of the original story, presents a narrative rife with creative strife and artistic discord – a grand tale spun by a seasoned storyteller. A colorful Texan personality, King uses the book as an

opportunity to assure himself a place in the musical's history. He foregrounds his work with constant humorous references to his own participation, such as "I hope those of my colleagues who occasionally feel abused or misused will consider that even in my biased version I could not always avoid giving instances of my own jackassery" (xi). This vicarious positioning makes *The Whorehouse Papers* a particularly troubling source since it is the only written account of the production process but must necessarily remain highly suspect in regards to its authority and authenticity. Yet despite its shortcomings, this source provides a unique view of one self-identified Southern man's account of the sordid tale of this musical's production, circulation, and consumption.

* * *

As a child of the South, born in Kentucky and raised in Georgia, I constantly struggle with my own identification as a Southerner. Performance provides me, as a practitioner and scholar, an opportunity to examine my own cultural makeup and enact and reperform the various facets of my personality. This project comes from an intimately personal space, a desire and a need to understand and make sense of the complicated nature of my own identificatory practices through an understanding of the history of staged contestations of what it means to be Southern. Through this work, I hope not only to trace a genealogy of Southern identity across the performances of these three popular entertainment traditions, but also to somehow locate myself within the complicated trajectory of Southern experience.

Chapter One

Exorcising the Stage:

Burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in New Orleans

“I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother I was oppressed and broken-hearted, with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity — because as a lover of my country I trembled at the coming day of wrath. It is no merit in the sorrowful that they weep, or to the oppressed and smothering that they gasp and struggle, not to me, that I must speak for the oppressed — who cannot speak for themselves”

– Harriet Beecher Stowe, On *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in a letter to Lord Denman, January 20th, 1853

“How is it that men who came here to circulate such works in times past, were glad to escape upon almost any terms; yet now the public sentiment is dead to efforts which may, unless checked, bring ruin upon this division of the Union? Who does not see in the world-wide crusade against the South, that unless she arouses herself, her fate for evil is sealed?”

– Mr. F. Hagan, On *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, July 1853

In his 1849 treatise on theatre in New Orleans, entitled *The Drama in New Orleans*, John Gaisford, an actor and amateur critic, details what he considers the city's unique cultural geography: “Perhaps no city in the world, certainly not in the United States, of such a limited population, can boast of containing within its limits so many edifices specifically intended for dramatic purposes, as our flourishing New Orleans” (7).

Gaisford continues to assure his readership that these structures are not “merely temporary erections to suit the purposes of spectators, or any sudden caprice of the public” but are in fact “solid, substantial buildings, in every respect well appointed and worthy of that patronage which is extended to them in such a literal manner” (7). For Gaisford, though, the presence of these theatrical buildings alone does not signify the importance of theatre for the city. The general public’s interaction with these buildings coupled with the manager’s “energy with which they govern them” certifies New Orleans as the premiere theatrical city of the South if not the United States.

The Drama in New Orleans provides substantial information on the composition of New Orleans theatrical audiences. Gaisford goes to great lengths to describe the audiences’ particular interactions with theatres and in doing so provides a vivid description of the makeup of theatrical audiences in New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century. During the winter months, he relates, New Orleans “is the rendezvous of an immense number of young men from the North and West” who come to the city seeking employment (7). These men are for the most part “single” with “ample means and good incomes” who seek out the theatre as a viable source of amusement to free them of “the fatigues of the day” and the often inadequate, crowded conditions of their lodging (7). Thus the audiences that gathered at typical New Orleans performances in the mid-nineteenth century were comprised of these disparate groups of transient strangers along with the many dedicated local inhabitants of the city “who are themselves fond of amusement” (74).

The city of New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed a reputation as a modern city, a cosmopolitan, diverse, urban center of trade and commerce. It was the

major port city of the South conducting trade with the Eastern United States, Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa. The numerous, opulent theatres throughout the city reflected the rewards of such economic prosperity. Yet it simultaneously remained a racist, racially divided city serving as the hub of the thriving slave trade and ultimately lacking any strong political leadership. New Orleans was a city of contradictions – a place where the past and the future converged in the present. As Harold Sinclair remarks in *The Port of New Orleans* (1942),

she is in some ways more like New York than any other city in America, and yet she boasts a smaller population than, say Milwaukee . . . She is a Marseilles or Shanghai, American style, shot through with overtones of Christy Minstrels, the *code duello*, white steamboats on a chocolate-covered river, coffee and cotton, wine in cobwebbed bottles, vine festooned patios, and Basin Street jazz. In a sense she is the living heart of the Deep South, yet in many ways she is hardly as Southern as Evansville, Indiana. She is, in short, New Orleans. (12)

The tensions present in Sinclair's comments describe a city dealing with the increasing presence of modernization and technology evidenced in the case of New Orleans by the burgeoning shipping industry and the continued construction of an urban center along the water. Those very forces that ultimately afforded the city great wealth and success also necessitated, at least in the minds of many businessmen and politicians, the spread of racist ideology and slavery. More so than any periodical's claim or newspaper's pronouncement, New Orleans's simultaneous gesturing toward the future with its thriving

shipping industry and toward the past with its reliance on the slave trade and other Old South ideologies positioned it as a truly modern city.

One of the primary locations this modern Southern identity played out was in the theatre. The relationship between the city of New Orleans and its theatrical spaces, the structures themselves and the performances occurring in them, reflects the tensions present throughout the entire city. New, modern facilities housed performance that embraced the Old South. Within the city, the theatre became a location for audiences to consider their relationship to the modernization occurring around them, inside and outside the theatre space, and to think about the effects of these processes on their own Southern identities. Looking at three burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that were performed over the course of a few months in the summer of 1854 will highlight the role of theatre within the city and locate the theatrical space as a potential site for identity construction and maintenance.

The 1854 theatrical season, only five years later than the gilded theatrical season of 1849 that Gaisford lavishly describes in his book, found New Orleans emerging from crisis. Just a year before, the city was hit with a Yellow Fever epidemic that killed 11,000 people while infecting over 40,000 more. In his book *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld* (1938), Herbert Asbury quotes a local physician, Dr. Clapp, who “recorded that in one period of twelve hours the burials were more than three hundred, and tells of a large boarding-house from which forty-five corpses were removed in thirteen days” (294). John S. Kendall, in his *History of New Orleans* (1922), speaks of the outbreak’s lasting impact on the city:

The details of the city reeking with filth. The bodies of vagrant dogs poisoned after the summer custom of the city authorities, putrefying in the streets; the corpses of human beings abandoned unburied in the cemeteries; the futile firing of cannon and burning of tar-barrels in the hope of 'purifying the air,' add horror to the picture of a desolate city.

(178)

Although the outbreak can be traced to a combination of a swelling urban population, unclean streets, and an increase in construction that resulted in many pools of stagnant water ripe for the breeding of mosquitoes, many local New Orleans residents insisted that "yellow fever was a stranger's disease" and went as far as to blame slaves for the outbreak (Kendall 175). With infectious disease running rampant throughout the city, theatrical activity became a potentially dangerous endeavor as any large gathering of people might promote the spread of Yellow Fever.

Following the epidemic, theatre managers had to convince people of the safety of the many theatrical spaces. Yet the threat of disease was only one of the possible dangers one might encounter during an evening at the theatre. By 1854, political unrest and deep-seeded corruption fostered by the city's weakened infrastructure led to increased violence throughout New Orleans. Kendall remarks that "the period between 1840 and 1860 was an epoch of steady but unadmitted degeneration" (204). During these twenty years, "political machines succeeded in establishing a spoils system by which patronage was controlled and the finances of the city exploited" and what had been a unique system of government still heavily influenced by French law and custom became "Americanized" and nearly indistinguishable from other large industrial cities (Asbury 286). A March 15,

1854 issue of the New Orleans *Bee*, a French language newspaper, declared that New Orleans was run “by the despotism of faction” and that

fair and equitable principles, sound policy, equal justice, and the rights of the minority have been ruthlessly sacrificed to the domination of a clique, which has seized upon and maintained power through the hateful employment of means so flagitious and corrupting as to have rendered us a hissing and a scorn in the eyes of the upright, well-organized communities. (*Bee* 1)

A corrupt government led to increased crime and violence. Asbury, for example, tells of a day in 1854 when both a policeman, Mochlin, was stabbed to death “while leading a gang of rowdies in an attack upon reform leaders” and the Chief of Police, Steve O’Leary was shot and killed (295). By 1855, the New Orleans correspondent for the *New York Tribune* was reporting that “a thousand murders might be committed in New Orleans, and if the murderers could not be found on the spot, our authorities would never make any efforts to have them punished” (Asbury 315). Only two years later, local newspaper *True Delta* proclaimed the city to be in the midst of “a reign of terror, and sarcastically apologized” to the mayor “for calling his attention to the danger which ordinary, peaceable citizens ran whenever they ventured abroad” (315-16).

The corruption and factionalism that afflicted the government of New Orleans, byproducts of the city’s struggles to acclimate to the processes of modernization, made its way into the theatre community as well. In his introduction to *The Drama in New Orleans*, Gaisford sarcastically dedicates his work to the Louisiana Histrionic Society, a theatrical organization built on an urban model and based in New Orleans that had denied

him membership. Gaisford calls the Society “a corporation” that possesses a “title to which, by law, they have an exclusive right till Anno Domini, 1874” to control the production of professional theatre in the city (30). Comparing the Histrionic Society to English Parliament, Gaisford charges that under their rules actors become “rogues and vagabonds, and immediately under the surveillance of the constabulary” (31). He surmises that the only good thing about the society’s presence is that “our talented amateurs may well recognize each other on being members of a *legitimate* corporation” (31). Gaisford’s comments, although almost certainly primarily motivated by his unsuccessful attempts to become a member, illustrate how the corrupting forces of governmental systems in New Orleans affected and infiltrated even the glorious theatres that many, including Gaisford, argued set the city apart from much of the rest of the country.

In the midst of conversations over increasing violence in the streets, unsanitary living conditions, and shady government dealings, the population of New Orleans could also be heard discussing another controversial issue that affected their everyday lives and the way they defined themselves. The publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on March 17th, 1852 sent a shockwave throughout most major Southern cities. Arguably, the South’s sense of regional identity and economy was primarily built upon a shared belief in the slave system, a system Stowe directly attacked in her novel. Southerners, both those who had actually read the novel as well as those who heard about it second hand, were outraged at Stowe’s negative depiction of life in the South, in particular Louisianans because of its central, critical focus on their state and the “loneliness and gloominess” of its “rural landscape” (Gossett 150). For within a year

of its publication, the novel had over 300,000 copies in print in the United States alone, an unprecedented number for any book other than the Bible, for such a short period of time (Gossett 164). The enormous success of the novel, Southerners determined, threatened the slave trade and ultimately their own identities. Southerners, and Louisiana natives in particular, sought means to respond publicly to the apparent threats, both ideological and literal, from the North this novel embodied. The popularity and success of the novel – both culturally and financially – only increased the ferocity of responses.

In response to the novel's enormous circulation, Southerners flooded newspapers and literary magazines with diatribes condemning the novel and its perceived condemnation of the Southern way of life. *The Southern Ladies Book: A Monthly Journal of Polite Literature*, in its February 1853 edition, issued an edict to all its readers stating that “the only true defense of the South” against Stowe's novel and

the swarms of similar insults and indignities which its success and the prevalent fanaticism will generate, is to create and cherish a true Southern literature, whose spontaneous action will repeal and refute such accusations, and command a respectful consideration wherever intellect is honored, or truth even dimly sought. (231)

The journal suggests that the South “honestly and cordially” maintain its own periodicals and newspapers and support the growth and development of its own writers. If the South does so, then all such attempts to sully its name will “be brushed aside without effort and without producing even momentary injury” (231). But if the South fails to sustain and foster Southern writing, “no one can complain if she [the South] is slandered without contradiction, and maligned without defense” (231). In response to this call to arms and

many others like it, Southern publications began a concerted campaign to blanket the South with written responses taking issue with all aspects of Stowe's novel.

The Southern Literary Messenger, the South's most important literary periodical of its time, founded in 1834, published letters, editorials, prose, and poetry criticizing the novel and its subsequent reception (Minor 1). One anonymous contributor submitted the following poem to the January 1853 issue:

When Latin I studied, my Ainsworth in hand,
I answered my teacher that *Sto* meant *to stand*,
But if asked, I should now give another reply,
For *Stowe* means, beyond and cavil, *to lie*. (SLM 1)

In this poem the author not only highlights that there are falsehoods present in the novel, but makes a claim for Southern intelligence through the clever use of Latin vocabulary.

Another contributor to the June 1853 issue, known only as G. F. H., offered a more extensive criticism, outlining his concerns in a document entitled "A Key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." Within this nearly ten page essay, G.F.H. presents a number of arguments against the novel that are representative of those frequently reprinted in this and other Southern publications. He attacks the critical reception of the book, particularly Northern writers, stating that "the Southern States of the Union and the institution of slavery are proposed as the scape-goat for the sins, and the expiation of the miseries of all humanity; and Mrs. Stowe is worshipped as the chosen messenger of heaven, to whom the revelation of this new and easy atonement has been committed" (322). Furthermore, G.F.H. offers Stowe as an example of the "unsexed" female mind that has "shattered the temple of female delicacy and moral graces" and thus undermined "traditional" cultural

practice. Not only has Stowe committed the great atrocity of propagating lies, but she has also set about undermining the very foundations of Southern culture and gender relations by unleashing her “Stowe-ic philosophy” to “fatally contaminate” women (324).

The essay also uses religion to simultaneously condemn the novel as blasphemous and expound upon the moral superiority of the South. G.F.H. denounces “the recklessness with which the name of Christ is bandied about” and Stowe’s “blasphemy” [sic] in adopting “a Christian motive as the cloak or excuse for every unlicensed and malignant project, and for every fanciful purpose” (329). Similar to his desire to protect the institutions of Southern femininity, he also cautions against the novel’s capacity when combined with the Abolitionists, Communists, and the “whole confraternity of social humbugs” to destroy religious beliefs and tradition: “Religion has been so mutilated, so defaced, so depraved, so travestied by the unhallowed chicanery of silly and turbulent charlatans . . . that any particular profession of prominent Christianity may be legitimately regarded as presumptive evidence of unchristian motives and diabolical purposes” (330). Not only does Stowe use religion in an immoral and profane manner, but her novel only provides further evidence of the moral denigration purportedly celebrated and championed by Northern social causes. The treatise ends with a few select biblical verses from the Epistle of St. James. One particularly suggestive quotation ultimately characterizes G.F.H.’s feelings on the novel: “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish” (330).

Other publications urged their readers to consider Stowe’s words a rallying cry for action. Even in more northern publications, like Washington D.C.’s *The National Era*, one could find reprints of Southern denouncements of Stowe’s novel. In a July 7th

edition from 1853, a piece entitled “Indications of the South” contains a reprint of a letter to the editor of the *Herald*, a South Carolina newspaper, signed A SOUTHERNER. In the letter, the concerned citizen exhibits yet another tactic of response to the popularity of the novel. He expresses his “surprise” at the “denunciation heaped upon” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by the Southern press and argues that in fact, Southerners “desiring dissolution of this Union” should “rejoice” in its success (107). No matter the truth value of Stowe’s words, they only serve to “widen the breach between us” which is “the honest prayer of every true patriot, every man who loves his home, the sunny South, and her cherished institutions” (107). Rather than dwelling on the specific inaccuracies or shortcomings, this letter, as well as many other writings like it, encourages Southerners to see the novel as a literal call to arms, a heart from which to start a regional movement.

Just like cities in other parts of the South, New Orleans also printed its own opinions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in local newspapers and magazines. Editors of the *The Daily Picayune*, the major New Orleans newspaper with the largest circulation in the city and throughout the rest of the western South, published letters and articles that expressed a range of positions. One letter submitted to the paper by a man from West Texas closely mirrors many of the diatribes found in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The letter, written in February of 1853, raises concerns over the novel’s veracity and, in turn, morality. It directly addresses Stowe, warning her that she “is answerable before high Heaven for the erroneous impressions you have sent forth to the world on this at present most exciting subject of slavery” and reminding her that, in fact, the institution of slavery “was founded originally by God himself and perpetuated by mankind” (West Texas 1).

Other printed responses take on different, less accusatory, more overtly racist forms and choose to paint vivid portraits of the civility and beneficial nature of the slave system to counteract the perceived negative depictions of Southern life in the novel. “A Picture for Mrs. Stowe” (June 1853), for example, details the sight of a Negro nurse maid tending to a young white child. According to the piece’s author, this image illustrates the actual harmonious existence and symbiotic relationship that exists in the South between the races, one in which “the Negroes watching over and protecting the infancy of the race to which in turn they look for protection and security” (Picture 1). These two examples demonstrate that while most Southerners (and New Orleans residents) agreed with one another on their hatred of the novel, the specifics of their critiques and the strategies they employed in their rebuttals differed rather significantly. One questions and attacks the truthfulness and ethics of the novel while the other focuses on presenting positive depictions of the region to combat Stowe’s words.

Other letters submitted to the *Picayune* condemned Stowe’s highly publicized travels to England and Europe and bemoaned the apparent growing international support for the novel. The authors of these pieces attempted to undercut what in the Northern press had been deemed a successful trip for Stowe by offering anecdotes and stories of her actual mixed reception. One letter presents a satirical poem allegedly written by a British humorist that expresses “hope that improvement had attended the lady addressed in her European tour, by the view of glaring evils existing abroad, and that she has brought back with her a better love of her own country by a contrast of its own blessings with the misery of others” (Welcome 1). In the poem itself, the author chastises Stowe

for not focusing her efforts in the United States and for airing the South's troubles to the rest of the world. It even goes as far as to claim that

If this you have not thought,
And love of country brought
In your bosom back
Home, Madame Stowe!
Than you're all over black,
And the heart of a woman you lack,
And you aren't worth the "smack"
Of Fred Douglass, Madame Stowe! (1)

Other pieces simply reported on the negative reception Stowe and her novel received on her tour. One such poem was published in the July 31st *Daily Picayune* which had supposedly lately been read on the stage of the Theatre Royal in Haymarket, London:

Of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" who has not had a sight?
Who of Topsy the name does not know?
If any one could wash a Blackamoor white
It would be Mrs. Beecher Stowe
It's a very good book, we know,
And has made our noses to blow;
But they've worked 'im so much I wish poor Uncle Tom
Was gone where all good niggers go. (Anonymous 1)

These two poems illustrate how New Orleans residents responded to the threat of international support for Stowe's novel and the subsequent disdain for the South. While

in the first poem the author discredits Stowe by questioning her patriotism and positioning her below even former slave, Abolitionist Fredrick Douglas, the second piece mostly forgoes personal attack and instead bemoans the popularity and incessant coverage of the novel and expresses a desire for its death. Such publications challenged the glowing reviews of her progress in the Northern press and mollified Southern thoughts of international scorn.

While Southerners' abhorrence of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reached a fevered pitch in the months after its release, the news of multiple attempts only a few months after the novel's publication by Northern playwrights to translate the novel into a theatrical text met with intense indignation and outright disdain. The decision to embody the text crossed an invisible line. Yet surprisingly, despite a strong religious presence throughout the region, anti-theatricality never emerged as a dominant force in the mid-nineteenth century, at least in the city centers like New Orleans and Charleston and thus rarely emerged as a cause to condemn the play. Instead, theatre was imbued with a great deal of potential power. Though the novel achieved certain popularity, the presence of theatrical enactments of the story threatened to spread the story to a much larger audience including those who could not read. Southerners in the city would have been quite familiar with theatre and its abilities dramatize and popularize history. Southern fears proved valid as Thomas Gossett, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (1985), posits that "perhaps as many as fifty people would eventually see *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the play, for every one person who would read the novel" (260). Moreover, performance threatened to physically fix the sordid images contained within the book within the minds of an audience in a way that the page could not. Seeing the images represented on stage

afforded a specific ocular proof – “seeing is believing” – particularly for those who may not have any experience with Southern life.

To make matters worse, no copyright law existed to enable an author to retain rights or gain royalties from theatrical productions of their fictional works. Any playwright, Abolitionist, or even an entrepreneur looking to make a quick buck could adapt the novel for the stage in whatever manner best suited their interests. By March of 1853, there were four versions in New York and eleven in England (Williams 77). Adding insult to injury and further fueling many Southerners’ belief that the United States government was chiefly concerned with Northern interests, Congress passed a copyright law in 1856, four years after the novel’s publication and too late to affect the numerous productions in major cities and touring the country.

The playwrights and actors associated with these theatrical adaptations saw their work as a natural continuation of the mission of the novel, and the evangelical language they employed only increased Southern scorn. In a 1928 manuscript for a production history of *UTC* entitled *From Slavery to Prohibition: A History of the Drama of Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, George P. Howard, grandson of George C. Howard, manager of the Troy Museum in New York, cousin of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* playwright George Aiken, and member of the famous 19th-century Howard acting family, captured some of this language when discussing the play’s legacy. In his introduction, Howard argues that “could ‘Uncle Tom’ have been played in the South, (and read without prejudice) there might have been no secession, no confederacy – no resort to arms” (47). Such claims spoke down to Southerners and positioned them like naughty children lacking the proper

education. Towards the end of his manuscript, Howard quotes his own father, Walter S. Howard, who spoke passionately about the educative importance of the play:

EDUCATE. EDUCATE. EDUCATE. Oh for a pen to write a novel to be read or to create a drama to be played; - and cast upon every moving picture screen in the country, that would teach the body politic a sermon, such as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' taught before the Civil War. (72)

Howard's words illustrate not only the critical treatment of the South in this rhetoric but also highlight the ways in which those associated with these productions took themselves very seriously. Their extreme self-righteousness shows in their promotion of *UTC* as a prophetic, unparalleled cultural phenomenon in American history that influences not just the national consciousness but politics and governmental policy as well: "it was the voice of Uncle Tom crying through the wilderness and echoing over the civilized world that compelled Lincoln to prove that - 'the pen was mightier than the sword,' and that the preservation of the Union rested in the emancipation of the slave" (Howard 68). These individuals, apart from commercial and financial concerns, deemed their productions an extension of a larger reform movement that sought to awaken the nation to the horrors of slavery and to compel it towards a return to moral order via the abolishment of the slave trade. They desired to win the war of ideas and employed performance as their chief weapon.

As one might expect, in New Orleans, the theatrical center of the South, residents responded vehemently to the preponderance of these performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* penned by the likes of Charles Western Taylor and George Aiken. They did this despite the fact that no performances of these theatrical adaptations were staged in the city prior

to the burlesques. They instead responded to the reports of the play's traveling and being staged in other parts of the country and in Southern cities, like Charleston and Washington, D.C.. Like the playwrights, producers, and actors of the Northern adaptations, New Orleans residents realized the potential power of performance to influence audiences and convey a wealth of ideas. Many who had simply expressed mild concern at the novel's increasing popularity felt obliged to speak out against the even greater threat theatrical performance might pose. *The Daily Picayune* published letters from citizens expressing their multiple fears at the growing number of productions throughout the nation and the possibility that they might be

fixing it [the novel] with all the arts of scenery, on the memory of thousands who do not read as a true picture of life and morals at the South; bringing up a new generation with the ineradicable idea that there is one-half of the territory of the United States, a people to whom the monstrous inhumanities and shameless corruptions described with so much deplorable art by this authoress, are familiar and welcome as daily food. The success of the attempt must be a dreadful calamity, the course of innumerable horrors to both sections and both races; and even if it should not prove to be successful, the attempt itself is a great crime, meriting abhorrence. (August 1852)

Correspondence such as this reveals an anxiety that theatre may in fact have been an even more effective means of conveying the anti-slavery, anti-South message than the novel itself. Contributors to the paper also focused on the question of morality and religion, often noting the fact that initially even Stowe herself expressed great concerns over the

theatrical versions of her novel and even discouraged those who sought her permission, citing theatrical performance as something “likely to be abused” that good Christians “should not give encouragement” (Gossett 261). A frequently reprinted item in periodicals and newspapers, both Northern and Southern, first reported in the *Providence Journal*, which first appeared in the *Daily Picayune* on December 28, 1852, referenced the response of Stowe’s father to the idea of staging her novel: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin has of course been dramatized, and of course is having a great run. The reverend father of the author says the Lord moved her to write the book, but the devil took it and put it up on the stage” (December 1852). These printed responses represent attempts by New Orleans residents to point out the hypocrisy of the religious arguments for the production of the play and to assert a moral and religious superiority. For these authors, their critique was less about anti-theatricality – although that did exist some places – but more about how these theatrical productions perpetuated the lies already published by Stowe and engaged in vicious, immoral slander.

Despite the passionate and often reasoned arguments of these written responses, New Orleans residents and artists sought a more useful way to respond to the embodiment of Stowe’s words. While letters and articles, as well as a handful of anti-Uncle Tom novels, sufficed to refute Stowe’s written claims, the rapidly increasing number of performances of an ever-growing number of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* adaptations for the stage nationwide necessitated a different approach to response. This response needed to challenge the negative images presented on stages throughout the country with distinctly Southern images that directly addressed Southern stereotype and falsities and that also soundly attacked their sources.

The most logical option for the South's leading theatrical city was to craft its own theatrical responses to stand alongside and converse with those performances in the major cities of the North. The city's theatrical infrastructure provided an ideal crucible for the development of dramatic responses with a multitude of venues, established audiences, and a generally supportive environment. While the actual act of creating the pieces fell to a handful of playwrights, one cannot underestimate the importance of the entire theatrical event for performers, audience, and theatre community or of the feeling within the city and the South that these theatrical events were a communal as well as individual response to the depiction of the South in *Uncle Tom's Cabins* various forms.

The three primary theatrical responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – Joseph P. Field's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life in the South As It Is*, Dr. William T. Leonard's *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana*, and George Jamieson's *The Old Plantation; or, Uncle Tom As He Is* – all appeared on New Orleans stages almost exactly two years after the publication of Stowe's novel over the period of three months, February, March, and April of 1854. In the case of all three, no written scripts remain and thus their legacy continues through the lived experience of those who attended as documented in reviews, letters, and articles. While theatres subsequently revived some of these pieces at later dates, their initial performances, produced in quick succession, represent the height of the New Orleans theatre community's dramatic attacks. The first two productions were presented at the newly opened Dan Rice's Amphitheater while the latter was staged at the St. Charles Theatre. Though these three pieces collectively led New Orleans's theatrical charge against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, each production constituted a quite different theatrical event with different playwrights, performers, venues, and audience reactions. The multiplicity

of approaches and styles, even with each piece adopting the methods of burlesque and professing to represent a unique Southern culture, illustrates the complexities of the Southern identities – culled primarily from plantation myths and minstrelsy – these productions charted, constructed, and consumed.

All three of the responses staged in New Orleans adopted an early, Americanized style of burlesque. Unlike the connotations of later burlesque with its scantily clad women, striptease numbers, and predominantly male audience, the early theatrical form evolved out of the one-parody English burlesques wherein “dialogue in rhymed couplets pursued humor through a relentless sequence of puns” (Kislan 61). Configuring the form for American audiences, early theatrical producers removed the couplets to lessen the aristocratic feel and to retain the satire. American burlesque – commonly referred to “a musical sex-and-comedy-travesty entertainment” – eventually donned “a more casual, comfortable, and well fitting attire,” favoring improvisation over “loyalty to character, plot, dialogue, or form” (61-62). Additionally, since the form also often uses vernacular language to poke fun or satirize popular literature such as Shakespeare, it seemed natural for those playwrights crafting their scripts to select burlesque as the form through which to launch the Southern theatrical rebuke of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The form’s overt theatricality, broad comic gestures, and risqué often sexual nature made it ideal for those Southern populations suspicious of overly sentimentalized, overly earnest theatre – like the Northern adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reported on in Southern newspapers and periodicals – and seeking an interactive experience wherein they could revitalize their own beliefs and values. Moreover, burlesque allowed the playwrights to incorporate

local dialects and dances and to place local traditions on the stage to ensure an audience of engaged participants and bolster a unique Southern identity.

Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life in the South As It Is, penned by Joseph M. Field, one of the most prominent Southern playwrights of the early nineteenth century, opened at Dan Rice's newly finished amphitheater on February 15th, 1854. Dan Rice was one of the most well known showmen of the nineteenth century, rivaling even P.T. Barnum, having risen to prominence playing a clown in various popular entertainments and eventually assuming the more challenging roles of producer and manager. Though a native New Yorker, Rice eventually developed a strong affinity for the city of New Orleans during his numerous national tour stops there. When he finally severed his ties with his Northern business partners and struck out on his own, Rice remembered the generosity of the Southern audiences and determined to establish a theatrical home in the city. New Orleans residents enjoyed Rice's unconventional behavior (making it "snow" in the streets to advertise his theatre), his showmanship, and his political positions (Carlyon 128). Though not an outspoken supporter of slavery, Rice certainly did not support Abolitionist causes, as evidenced by his decision to produce burlesques that launched scathing attacks of the anti-slavery cause. Through his primary concerns were economic, Rice found kindred spirits in the citizens of New Orleans who embraced his eccentricities and supported his creative endeavors. On the opening of his amphitheatre, Rice delivered a speech thanking the city, expressing his hopes for his new theatre and offering himself up as a beloved local antihero:

Yes my friends, I am here in New Orleans.

And at the thought fond memory pictures many scenes.

This theatre of my trials, triumphs, fortune, fame,
All good that clusters round my humble name.
Nay, start not, politician, sage, or hero,
A clown may have a fame as well as Nero,
Byron, Payne, or any other elf,
Born to annoy the world and to confound himself.

[. . .]

So to my task, for it is my delight
To see you here, as it will be every night,
And as your acquaintance I wish much longer,
May friendship's bond each day grow stronger.

[. . .]

Bring in the horse and let the fun begin,
For if there's fun about, be sure Dan's in. (qtd. in Brown 125-6)

Such speeches endeared him to the citizens of New Orleans and the vigorous theatrical community showed their support for him through their attendance at his shows.

Dan Rice's Amphitheater itself was unlike other theatrical spaces in New Orleans at the time. Located on St. Charles Street, between Poydras St. & Commercial Place, the 2,000 seat theater was built by George Lawrason, owner of the property and one of the more prominent citizens of New Orleans. The interior layout of the theatre included a large dress circle with stadium style seating that allowed each row to see over the row in front of it. The dress circle formed a horseshoe around a central ring, typical of an amphitheater and quite appropriate for equestrian acts. A stage, suitable for dramatic

performances, stood behind the ring that had doors on either side to the stables located out back and the dressing rooms housed underneath. A “Parquette” or balcony lay above the dress circle. For socializing before, after, and perhaps during the shows, the theatre offered elegant saloons with fully stocked bars (Carlyon 170). Maria Ward Brown, in her 1901 biography of Rice, details the theatre’s exterior architecture and placement within the city: “It [the theatre] occupied a central and commanding position in that busiest and gayest of the Crescent City’s many gay and busy thoroughfares, St. Charles Street, and its original and picturesque exterior immediately arrested the attention of anyone who passed” (130). She goes on to praise its “elegant architecture” above that even of the rival St. Charles Theatre and the Southern Museum (130).

For one of the first dramatic performances in his new theatrical home, Rice arranged to bring in Joseph M. Field and his dramatic company from Mobile, Alabama to present their new adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* credited to one “Mrs. Harriet Scheecher Blow” entitled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; Or, Life In the South As It Is* (Carlyon 168). The play ran for six consecutive days before closing, due to a previous engagement for Field’s company that required them to leave town. By the time he wrote this piece, Field had gained a reputation as one of the South’s premiere playwrights, having written nearly 20 plays, although he also fancied himself an actor, manager, reporter, editor, and columnist. Though born in Dublin, Ireland and primarily associated with the city of St. Louis, Missouri for most of his career, Field spent a number of theatrical seasons in Mobile and New Orleans. He specialized in satirical, humorous pieces that pulled heavily from his own experiences traveling throughout the South and Southwest and frequently drew comparisons with Mark Twain. While a few of his journalistic

endeavors still exist as well as two volumes of his prose sketches, none of his plays were ever published and thus do not survive in print. Only his play *Job and His Children*, discovered and published in a number of anthologies including Eugene Page's *Metamora and Other Plays* (1941), remains as a complete example of his theatrical work. Thus when reconstructing his burlesque of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I must rely on newspaper and periodical accounts of the performances as well as audience member recollections to recreate the moments of performance (Page 238).

While he never primarily identified as a political writer, Field, later in his career, found himself moved to respond to specific political events with his signature satirical style. As a strong pro-slavery advocate, Field felt compelled to use theatre to rebuke the lies he felt Stowe's novel was guilty of propagating throughout the nation. His impulse to create this theatrical rebuttal aligned with Dan Rice's desire to stage a new piece in his amphitheatre that might attract the attention of his decidedly pro-slavery, pro-Southern audience. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life In the South As It Is* was the result of their collaboration. Advertisements for the production touted it as "a satirical, quizzical burlesque" and the production succeeded in combining Field's satirical form with burlesque and moments of melodrama culled from the popular theatrical versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Though no scripts exist, local newspapers did cover these theatrical events in a variety of ways, publishing everything from advance stories to advertisements and listings, actual scenes, and reviews. In most cases, the fragments of dialogue represent the only extant actual texts from these performances and as such provide a glimpse at the possible tone and style of the overall piece. On February 16th, 1854, the day after the

play opened, *The Daily Delta*, another of New Orleans major newspapers and chief rival of the *Daily Picayune*, published an excerpt of dialogue in their local affairs section:

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN – (scene – Uncle Tom, shivering and forlorn, amid the inclemencies of a Canadian winter. A Philanthropist approaches.)

Phil. – Well, Uncle Tom, you seem to be in trouble? What do you want?

Uncle Tom – Donno, Massa.

Phil. – Do you want a house?

Uncle Tom – No, Massa.

Phil. – Do you want money?

Uncle Tom – No, Massa.

Phil. – Do you want clothes?

Uncle Tom – No, Massa.

Phil. – Well, what do you want?

(In the distance, the strains of “Old Folks at Home” are indistinctly heard, and Uncle Tom, listening with tears in his eyes, breaks out saying -)

Uncle Tom – Massa – That's what I want! (*DD*, 16th 2)

Field took a scene directly from the novel and subsequent stage versions, where Uncle Tom finds himself in Canada, presumably out of the clutches of the slave system, and restructures it to convey drastically different meanings. In Field's rendition, Uncle Tom longs to return to his “home” down South and to a slavery system that supported and took care of him. Instead of enjoying his freedom, Uncle Tom laments his displacement and expresses his victimization at the hands of those who have removed him from his home.

The scene simultaneously satirizes Stowe's novel, making the Abolitionist project appear foolhardy, unnecessary, and even cruel, and upholds and reinscribes a Southern identity connected to home, family, and belonging. Following the dialogue, the *Daily Delta* comments that this point in the performance "brought tears into the eyes of almost every one present, in the same manner as other points produced irresistible laughter" (2).

Through the character of Uncle Tom, audiences of Field's play could affirm their confidence and belief in the slave system.

Aside from the character of Uncle Tom, Field's burlesque also relied heavily on location to convey its message to its audiences. Another portion of text, published in the local affairs section of February 17th issue of *The Daily Delta's*, another New Orleans newspaper, describes two opposing locations represented in the play: a stark, Canadian wilderness and an old plantation. The article paints the picture of a Canadian landscape "where, amid old pines bending under waves of snow and glittering with ice, the fugitives long to get home" (5). While they huddle together in their abject state, they begin to sing the popular Southern song "Carry me back to old Virginny, To Old Virginny's shore" (5). This song was no doubt inserted into the text to call upon Southern sympathies and nostalgia and provide a way of dramatizing many Southerners' beliefs that slaves enjoyed their lives on the plantation and missed it when taken away from it. To further emphasize this point, the article then juxtaposes this image with another image of the old plantation. Rather than frigid, barren nothingness, the article describes the final image of the play: "the curtain drops on a gang of plantation Negroes dancing 'Juba' and singing 'Old Jawbone'" (5). They rejoice at their lives reclaimed, back "home" in the warm sun, in front of a whitewashed plantation and lush vegetation, alive and moving rather than

mournful and frozen. The placement of these two scenic descriptions juxtaposed alongside one another potentially indicates the kind of tactics Field employed in writing his play. For a Southern audience, not only would the song have been familiar and most likely carry great cultural and personal meaning, but it would have been a moment of possible audience interaction where a particularly vocal, supportive audience might have sung along while taking in the familiar scenic landscape.

Similar to the selected scenes published by New Orleans newspapers, advance articles aimed to appeal to and prepare Southern audiences for the performance. The item that appeared in the February 15th *Daily Delta* for this production emphasized that Field and his company were coming to New Orleans from Mobile, Alabama. This gesture may have been an attempt to emphasize Field's connection to Mobile rather than his association with St. Louis and Missouri – a less Southern location. Emphasizing the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the northern press and that Uncle Tom's "adventures have been dramatized and put on the stage in sundry Northern cities," the advance piece positions *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life In the South As It Is* as a "re-dramatization" with "every accessory to render the piece successful and increase its great intrinsic interest" (*Daily Delta* 3). Such advance stories, published primarily in New Orleans newspapers, aside from drumming up potential audience, strove to position them as partaking in an important event, an opportunity to fight back against the proliferation of Stowe's novel through their attendance at this play. The article speculates that there will "unquestionably be a crowded house and those who wish to make sure of the occasion should engage seats beforehand" and in doing so attempts to compel the reader into securing their tickets early and joining this specific theatrical community (3).

Unlike the advances or the excerpts, the notices and advertisements for Field's burlesque provide more practical information than detailed description of the piece itself. They include, for example, things like the time of performance, location, and the contents of the entire bill and occasionally contain things like a cast list, plot summary, or catalog of scenes. Occasionally, the newspapers include a statement or two that attempt to build buzz and thus attract larger audiences. For example, the February 17th issue of *The Daily Picayune* included a notice announcing the night's performance that included a brief review: "The dramatic performance [here] continues to attract full houses nightly. A day performance, as usual, to-morrow and Sunday. Uncle Tom is having a great run at Dan's. It is well got up and well acted" (2). The following day, the February 18th *The Daily Picayune* ran another, even shorter, notice calling the piece "the leading attraction at this popular place of public amusement" and praising its "attractive style" and stating again that it "is played well" (2). Taken together these notices potentially speak of both the desire to cultivate an audience for this piece and to the overwhelming audiences the play actually attracted. The enthusiasm with which the New Orleans papers reported on Field's play illustrates not only their love for Dan Rice and his theatrical endeavors, but their desire to encourage and foster performance that possessed a Southern voice and point of view.

Interestingly enough, the only item in common among most of the various advertisements placed in the Amusements – Theatre section was a disclaimer alerting readers to the difference between the performance and Stowe's work: "The public are respectfully requested to observe that this piece has no reference to the novel of the same name written by Harriet Beecher Stowe" (*DD*, Feb. 26th 3). Since copyright law

protecting Stowe from illegal reproductions of her work and compelling the playwright to claim artistic license did not exist until 1856, such warnings meant something different to the newspaper's readers. First, it reminds the reader that although it does share part of its title with those productions they are in fact not seeing one of the theatricalized versions of the novel on tour from the North. Furthermore, the warning appeases those Southerners still angered by the very mention of Stowe's name who might be discouraged from attending the performance otherwise. The statement also reads as a kind of insider joke, adding further insult to Stowe, as the piece obviously pulls heavily from the novel and stage adaptations. Finally, the statement, perhaps even suggested to these papers by Field himself, as it does not appear in advertisements for the other two burlesques, fits within the oeuvre of Field's satirical writing style – the distancing from the actual playwright perhaps gives Field the freedom and space to sharpen his wit and strengthen his barbs.

In addition to printing other items such as advance stories and advertisements, these newspapers, quite infrequently, included short reviews, meant to foster business and attract audiences. On February 16th, *The Daily Delta* reported that the show painted an idyllic vision of Plantation life that “brought tears to the eyes of every one present, in the same manner as other points produced irresistible laughter” (4). Likewise, the February 18th edition, besides commenting on the “crowded houses every night,” remarked that “the drama abounds in comic and amusing points, and in touching allusions, and in songs which are popular and pleasing. Everyone thus far has been greatly gratified with the piece” (4). On the eve of the final performance, the February 19th issue of *The Daily Delta* called the piece “beautiful, pleasing, and laughable” and urged “those who have not

seen it” to “attend at once” (1). *The Crescent* went one step further in February 17th issue when it praised the play’s ability to display “something of the pathos and experience of Negro life” (2). These reviews provide glimpses into the possible makeup, style, and tone of the performance. They also illustrate that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Or, Life In the South As It Is* impressed both audiences and critics, filling house each night of its six night run and pleasing reviewers with its apparently accurate or at least evocative depictions of Southern (and Northern) life.

The immediate success of the play signaled that a certain desire had perhaps finally been met. There was now a theatrical voice in New Orleans directly responding to those Northern attacks leveled at them through the myriad incarnations of Stowe’s words. Rice and Field had found a way to transform the theatrical experience into a matinee or evening of redefining and restating what it means to be Southern by capitalizing on the racist rhetoric of the beauty of the old plantation and cultivating a yearning for home through the character of Tom. By attending the performance, audience members took part – both passively and actively (through singing, etc.) – in constituting an embodied theatrical response to Stowe and her fellow Northerners.

Though Field’s company had to leave town to fulfill a previously agreed to engagement, Dan Rice was not about to let a potentially lucrative endeavor slip away. Following closely on the heels of the unheralded success of Field’s play and capitalizing off of the strong Southern sentiment in the air, Rice opened yet another burlesque of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at his amphitheatre on March 6th, 1854 entitled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Louisiana* written by Dr. William T. Leonard, the co-editor of *The Southern Ladies’ Book: A Monthly Journal of Polite Literature*.

Unlike Field, Leonard was not known as a Southern dramatist. In fact, he was actually trained as a medical doctor and had been involved in the planning of a city hospital in Baltimore, Maryland (Carlyon 94). Yet Leonard was a close friend of Dan Rice and, at Rice's urging, Leonard moved to New Orleans to manage the Dan Rice Museum, later renamed the Great Southern Museum. The Great Southern Museum was meant to rival and be the Southern equivalent of P.T. Barnum's American Museum. While Leonard perhaps did not have a great deal of theatrical credentials, having really only dabbled in theatre and perhaps fancying himself a devotee, he did have writing experience from his years as co-editor of *The Southern Ladies Book*, a popular literary magazine with a wide circulation. While co-editor, Leonard published a number of his own articles including "The Genius of the Age is Progression" and "The Influence of Association on Mental Developments." In the latter article, Leonard reveals his particular politics regarding Southern identity and demonstrates his own particular writing style:

The Southerner is distinguished by a glance from all the world – as one whose home is in a land where generous nature, with bounteous hand, scatters all its treasures, and where man catches the inspiration of liberality in his every breath, as one who places a light estimate of life, because he has been taught on what slender thread 'tis hung,' and in all things looks rather to its purposes, than to its preservation. (67)

As evidenced by this sample of Leonard's writing, *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* most likely differed from Field's more satirical work in its flowery, humorous language and particular Southern sentiment. For whereas Field simply visited the city, Leonard

became a resident of New Orleans, got to know its citizens, and developed a strong identity as a Southerner.

While no copies of Leonard's script remain, newspapers provide pertinent information that allows one potentially to piece together the specifics of these performances. Interestingly, whereas *The Daily Delta* covered *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life In the South As It Is* rather extensively, they covered Leonard's play significantly less. Other New Orleans papers made up for that lack by increasing their own articles, reviews, and advertisements, though none included excerpts from the script itself. Notices printed in both *The Daily Delta* and *The Daily Picayune* advertise the piece as "a domestic drama" in "two sets" or "two acts," a direct reference to George Aiken's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which advertised it was a "domestic drama in six acts," and included Leonard's character list:

Southern Characters: Uncle Tom, Dan Rice; Aunt Tabby, Mr. Murray; Mr. Springer, Mr. F.H. Russton; Mrs. Springer, Mrs. Lewellyn; Eva, Miss Heath; Debby, Mr. J. Reynolds; Overseer, Mr. M. Walker; Uncle Ben, Master Beatty; Collius, Mr. Ormond; Plantation Hands, &c. Ladies and Gentlemen of the Company and auxiliaries

Northern Characters: Mrs. Convention Sympathy, a Higher Law Expounder and a Bloomer of First Class, Mr. Lewellyn; Mrs. Harriet Bleacher Straw, a milliner authoress, Mrs. Jerome; Mr. Universal Freedom, Mr. Logan; Young America, a fast young gentleman from Down-East, Mrs. Ada Brown Logan; Policemen, Mob, &c., gentlemen of the company and auxiliaries. (*DP* March 7th 4)

The character list reveals that this burlesque possibly adopted a distinctly more overtly humorous tactic, pairing more realistic Southern characters with broadly drawn, northern caricatures, as opposed to Field's more satirical, biting, or even cerebral style. The allegorical nature of all the Northern characters, such as Mrs. Convention Sympathy, illustrates a use of broad characterizations drawing on stereotypes. Such a use of stereotype attempts to confront the perception that Stowe's novel and the subsequent stage versions presented unfair depictions of Southerners based on lies and supposition rather than fact or experience. Moreover, the realistic depiction of the Southern characters speaks to the desire of those involved to create and foster a certain Southern identity through these performances. The character list might also reveal other differences between this performance and Field's play, like those suggested by Rice's biographer David Carlyon in *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of* (2001), such as the presence of the mob "which the South expected of the riotous North" and the possibility that "ages and genders were crossed" and minstrel traditions more heavily relied upon, "including Rice in blackface" (Carlyon 173).

Once *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* opened at Dan Rice's Amphitheatre, newspapers touted its good attendance that continued to grow the longer the show ran. The March 7th issue of *The Daily Picayune* reports that the piece was "produced for the first time last night very strongly" (2). Six days later, that same paper refers to the play as "the new popular and favorite drama" indicating its growing reputation (2). The March 21st *Daily Picayune* announces that due to "the thousands who have seen it and wish to see it again, and others, who have not seen it, [that] desire an opportunity to do so," that *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* will run that evening and "every evening until

further notice” (3). By April 2nd, *The Daily Picayune*, *The Daily Delta*, and other print media are referring to the piece as “the most popular piece ever produced in New Orleans” (2). The reports of increasing audiences speak not only to the popularity of the piece, but to the potential, wide-ranging circulation of the ideas expressed and championed in the performance. The fact that Leonard’s play, which professed a strong, pro-Southern message while maintaining an equally forceful (though humorous) rebuffing of the North achieved such a heightened level of popularity at a time when the city itself was still recovering from serious hardships, illustrates that Southern theatrical audiences greatly desired opportunities to gather together and publicly reaffirm their Southern identities.

Dan Rice’s decision to take on the role of Uncle Tom in this production signified a sort of victory for Southern audiences. Not only was Rice a talented clown and minstrel performer, but his presence in the role as a well respected, Southern performer gave the audience a central public figure to rally around. In essence, Rice’s performance allowed Southern audiences the opportunity to reclaim for themselves the title character of Stowe’s novel. Similar to Field’s decision to include “Old Virginny” in his burlesque, Rice decided to include a song. He wrote new lyrics, chastising Northerners for their mistreatment of slaves, and paired them up with the popular tune “Wait for the Wagon” from his own performance repertoire. In her 1901 biography of Rice, Maria Ward Brown includes the lyrics to this song which she calls “Dan Rice’s original song sung by him in his original play of Southern ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’” (438). Within the burlesque, Rice more than likely sang the song as the character of Uncle Tom. Of particular note is an interesting verse in which Tom tells of his “strange adventures among the Northern

States” and his realization after spending time in a Northern jail “after total failure in his efforts to achieve equality along with freedom” (Roppolo 222):

I travel'd round de country an' felt dat I was free.

For I was cold and starvin' from de elbow to de knee,

But Massa has forgub me, an' I know dat all am right,

Tho' if [to audience] it gibs you pleasure, I'll run off eb'ry night (428)

Through this verse, Rice as Uncle Tom comments directly on the traveling theatrical phenomenon of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the injustices done to the slave through the piece. Rice here references both Stowe's novel and Aiken's adaptation when he reminds his audience of the perils of the freed slave, starving and without shelter, and of his position that both authors grossly exaggerate the horrendous conditions of the slave plantation. Rice's lyrics highlight the ways in which Stowe's work misuses slavery as a source for entertainment, presenting it in what he and other Southerners claimed was an unrealistic, untrue manner typified by the following lines of Simon Legree, the monstrous slave dealer, from Aiken's adaptation: “Ye'll larn a pretty smart chance of things ye never did know before I've done with ye. [Strikes TOM with whip, three blows. – music cords each blow.] There! now will ye tell me ye can't do it?” (Aiken 427). While the novel and early theatrical adaptations depicted slavery as a horrible institution in which slaves were treated harshly, Rice uses lyrics such as these to counter such slanderous speech. These lyrics also illustrate, in turn, the ways in which the North actually remains more barbaric, harsh, and cruel than the South. The direct address implicates the audience in that moment and forces them to consider whether they “want” Tom to continue to run around starving while searching for freedom or if they “want” him to return to his home on the

plantation. These lyrics point out the perceived hypocrisy of Stowe's characterization of slavery, and perhaps inadvertently even slavery itself, and make an educated argument bound to make many Southerners feel vindicated.

The Crescent, perhaps above all other newspapers in New Orleans, championed *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* praising, in particular, its depiction of Southern life on stage. In particular, the paper commented on the performance of Rice as Uncle Tom. They stated that he "played the part as though he had been born and bred on that stage" and that he possessed "a great deal more histrionic merit than we had given him credit for, and is even better as a low comedian than as a clown" (March 9, 13). Moreover, they urged people to attend the shows for they "have never seen a better representative of Negro character nor a more effective representation of domestic slavery as it is" (March 18). As the popularity of the show grew, so grew *The Crescent's* praise:

We confess that we had never before seen a negro comedy upon the stage in that perfection in which we have often seen it at its proper home, the merry plantation, when, on some occasion jollity, Cuffy gave loose himself in all his boundless hilarity and was the inimitable, the native born Jack-pudding. As for Dan, he shines the very chief of this and of almost everything else, whether the droll or the man of sense, the person, the lawyer, or the horse-jockey. Of the ebony Dan stands the very Garrick . . . of sooty performers, the true Black Prince . . . He was well sustained, and the whole piece is the only genuine presentment of Negro life and manners that we have ever seen (March 22)

For this paper, as well as many others, these performances did important work to portray upon the stage a more realistic depiction of life in the South than had previously been seen. Dan Rice's performance, in particular, led critics to compare him to the great English actors of the 19th century. Such commentary illustrates how Leonard's burlesque allowed Southern audiences to interact with a text that reflected their own experiences. Through witnessing their own world in performance, Southern audiences were reminded of who they were and of their relationship to the rest of the nation. Taken together with Field's play, Leonard's piece continued to fuel the momentum behind the growing Southern response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But more so than Field's play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* with Dan Rice, local personality, in the lead role spoke to the citizens of New Orleans and convinced them of the act of theatre going as a form of civic and regional engagement. As a March 23rd *Daily Picayune* notice commented, *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* is a "vindication of the Louisiana Cabin . . . a beautiful drama and a spirited illustration of Life in the South" (3).

Unlike the six night, limited run of the first burlesque, Leonard's play ran for thirteen consecutive nights, only to be revived for a three night run in late March, then again on March 29th and 31st, and finally for a four night run starting on April 1st for a total of twenty-three evening performances (Roppolo 221). The popularity of this show illustrated the continued desire for theatre that addressed issues of Southern identity, affirming, confirming, and supporting a shared Southern identity, and that combated the perceived attacks being leveled by the North against the region's very character. Moreover, Leonard's close friendship with Dan Rice, and Dan Rice's decision to perform

the role of Uncle Tom in the burlesque himself increased the profile of this production within the city.

Following dual successes with both *Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life In the South As It Is* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana*, Dan Rice was the toast of New Orleans. As Carlyon states, "Here was a man, convulsing audiences, who made abundant Southern sense" (174). In the April 8th issue of *The Daily Delta*, an item in the local affairs section detailed the "well attended," "enthusiastic" benefit performance that had been conducted the night before for Rice's wife (3). At the end of the piece, the paper remarks, "We only repeat our opinion that Dan Rice's is among the best places of amusement in the city, and hope it will be correspondingly patronized. Why doesn't Dan have a complimentary?" (3). Just above this paragraph praising Rice's achievements and wishing for more venues like his amphitheatre, there is an item commenting on the poor attendance at a performance at the Saint Charles Theatre the night before. Towards the end of that piece, the author posits that the return that night of Mr. Jamison's new play *The Old Plantation: or, Uncle Tom As He Is* might well correct the theatre's downturn in audience and revitalize the theatre's box-office (3).

Not wanting to miss out on the popularity of the burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* playing at Dan Rice's Amphitheatre, managers at the St. Charles Theatre had decided a couple months earlier to stage their own burlesque and sought out writer and actor George Jamison to pen their script. The St. Charles Theatre was a long standing theatrical institution in New Orleans. Built in 1835 by New Orleans theatrical entrepreneur James Caldwell, the St. Charles Theatre quickly became one of New Orleans premiere theatrical venues. Unlike Dan Rice's Amphitheatre, the St, Charles

Theatre was a more traditional theatre space. Kendall's *Golden Age of Theatre in New Orleans* (1952) provides some of the main architectural details:

The front measured 129 feet high from one side to the other, by seventy-six feet high . . . Ten Corinthian columns supported a portico which ran between the second and third floor . . . above the portico ten Doric columns carried the decorative effect of the façade up to a pediment . . . and was further embellished with lunettes over the first and third floor openings, and with figures of Muses in high relief in the pediment. (114)

Inside the theatre, there were a total of four floors, each with its own drawing room. The first floor had nineteen boxes at a cost of \$1000 per box with twelve chairs in each and “these were the only part of the house where ladies sat” (114). In all, there were forty-seven boxes among the four levels and a total seating capacity of 4100 people. Looking out from the stage into the auditorium “presented the appearance of an elongated semicircle, flanked by boxes” (115). The orchestra pit was 12 feet deep and extended the full length of the stage while the proscenium arch was flanked by double Corinthian columns. From the curtain to the back of the stage measured eighty six feet and there were nine entrances on each side of the stage. Moreover, the stage was lit by gas lighting (114-15). According to Kendall, during its entire history, the St. Charles Theatre “was entirely filled only on one or two occasions” (117). From John Gaisford's description of the St. Charles Theatre in *The Drama in New Orleans* (1849), we can surmise that the theatre of 1853 was similar but not the same as when it was originally built due to a horrible fire in 1843. Yet for Gaisford in 1849 it remains “the favorite resort of exotic stars who visit this city, and is filled or empty according to the merits or pretensions of

these gentry” (10). Gaisford’s remarks, though written much earlier, support Kendall’s comments, stating that the St. Charles “is entirely too large for the audience who frequent it” and often operates as “a rather slow place of amusement” (10). The success of the burlesques at Dan Rice’s Amphitheatre provided the St. Charles theatre with a possible solution to their frequent audience difficulties. As Carlyon put it, “even the St. Charles Theatre bowed before the storm of Rice’s success, flattering by imitation in its new drama, *The Old Plantation, or Uncle Tom As He Is*” (174).

Yet despite Carlyon’s claims of similarity, the St. Charles Theatre actually presented a much different burlesque of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* than either of those presented at Dan Rice’s Amphitheatre. George Jamison’s script for the burlesque *The Old Plantation: Or, Uncle Tom As He Is*, subtitled a “new domestic drama in three acts,” certainly makes reference to Field’s script in its title, and maintains many of the same character types found in Leonard’s script, but it differs in many important ways from those burlesques and, in turn, speaks to a more studied, solemn Southern identity as opposed to the broadly drawn homage to plantation life found in the previous two burlesques. The April 4th Tuesday supplement of *The Daily Picayune* contained an item previewing the show and informing the readership of Jamison’s qualifications and approach to the material:

Mr. George Jamison, who writes as well as he acts, has flown at higher game than merely to amuse and excite laughter. He has shown the practical working of the mistaken philanthropy of those who would rashly interfere with the institutions and social relations of the South, and holds

up to view the radical error that lies at the very foundation of

Abolitionism, in the most striking and convincing manner. (1)

Unlike the satirical nature of Field's work or the broadly humorous strokes of Leonard's piece, Jamison's burlesque strikes a rather serious tone and appears to rationally and logically attack Stowe's assertions. Jamison's work stands out against other "exhibitions of the truth of the matter [that] have so far been of a sketchy and ephemeral kind and have produced but little impression" (1). The press surrounding Jamison's script heavily criticizes the previous two burlesques, rendering them ineffectual and forgettable, despite the presence of Dan Rice around or in both projects. Most likely, much of the posturing present in this preview involves the dispute between a seasoned, long lasting New Orleans theatre and the up and coming, beloved newcomer's theatrical outfit.

The other rhetoric that surfaces out of this charge is one of high and low art. For this *Daily Picayune* writer, the burlesque techniques adopted by Rice's two productions are somehow less weighty and thus less effective than Jamison's script that resembles a burlesque crossed with a "serious play." The item suggests an equivalent between seriousness and effectiveness that is perhaps unfounded as the play may have in fact suffered from the sentimentality and over-earnestness most often associated with the original source material of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In reporting on the decision to hold the play over for evening, *The Daily Delta* takes the opportunity to point out that the song "Wait for the Wagon . . . is one of the greatest features of the entertainment, especially the last two verses which recount the glorious achievement of Lecomte and Lexington" (2). Lecomte and Lexington refers to a famous horse race in 1854 that was seen by over 20,000 people. The significance here is that Jamison has inserted "Wait for the Wagon"

into his burlesque but maintained the original lyrics – opting for nostalgia over politics. The decision to keep the song intact and celebrate Southern culture rather than rewrite the lyrics to mock Northern values perhaps typifies the style of the piece and may point to an overly reverent tone.

In a manner similar to the *Daily Picayune* story above, the press lavished *The Old Plantation* with praise throughout its four-night run yet did not reprint any excerpts of text. That same item ended with the author detailing the “strongly and truthfully drawn” character of Uncle Tom to be portrayed by Jamison himself and predicting for “this piece the fullest success” (1). After only one performance, the front page of the April 8th *Daily Picayune* declared the piece “entirely successful” and “received with the warmest enthusiasm” (1). It continued to describe the show as “full of finely and accurately conceived characters, forcibly and faithfully drawn, and conveys a good, true, sound moral and purpose in every line” (1). The article goes on to praise Jamison’s performance “in look, and act, and speech” as a “great personation” (1). The content of the press on the first two burlesques is not near the rich level of language and detail of the descriptions found in this and subsequent items for Jamison’s piece. Unlike Field, who left New Orleans when his company got called elsewhere, Jamison demonstrated a devotion to the city and delayed his own travels upwards of three times to continue performing often at the request of the New Orleans citizenry. For example, an item in the April 11th *Daily Delta* details “a number of ladies” who sent a written request to the manager of the St. Charles asking Jamison to play another night.

Of all of the burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* presented in New Orleans in the Spring of 1854, *The Old Plantation* was the only one to be revived years later. In

December of 1855, Jamison returned to the role of the “real” Uncle Tom for three performances at The St. Charles Theatre. Jamison was credited by the press with embodying Uncle Tom with a humanity heretofore unseen in any New Orleans theatre, so much so that they gave him the honor of referring to him as the “real” Uncle Tom. *The Daily Picayune* reminded its readers that the piece “was universally accepted, when first presented, as a capital offset to the rather romantic story of “Uncle Tom” by Mrs. Beecher Stowe” (Dec 9 1). Six years later, in 1861, it was revived again for two nights, after failing in an attempt at a Broadway run in New York. The reasons for the show’s repeated success appear to be in its rather serious tone and the way it combats Stowe’s overt sentimentality and the Northern theatrical adaptation’s melodramatic form with hard “reality” and “fact.” Without actual scripts or even segments of text, it’s quite difficult to determine what exactly these reviewers meant when they said Jamison’s Uncle Tom was the “real” Uncle Tom. Unlike Rice, who we know performed his Uncle Tom in blackface, the lack of detailed documents leaves us guessing how Jamison portrayed him.

However, it is certain that these three burlesques should not be considered completely separate from one another, as suggested by most of the few theatre histories in which they appear. During this three month period, these three shows directly spoke to each other, building off what had come previously and amassing an attack against Stowe together. Taken together these three burlesques marked a significant transition wherein Southerners realized the potential for theatre to serve as a crucible for the generating of ideas, the testing out of identities, and the questioning of Northern attempts to define identity. For these citizens of New Orleans, these burlesques allowed a moment through

the staging of these counterattacks to comment on their relationship to their increasingly modern city. Stowe in some ways came to stand in for the forces of modernization trying to disrupt and disavow established patterns of living. Stowe's words had forced the issue and through her novel and subsequent theatrical adaptations compelled Southerners, in the act of determining how to respond, to look within themselves and take stock of what it really meant to be Southern. Through this process, these burlesques reaffirmed a Southern identity connected to plantation mythology that privileges nostalgia and idealizes and infantilizes African Americans to justify their enslavement. Theatre became one way to accomplish this as a community, defining both for the individual and the group, in the moment of live, embodied performance. Historian Joseph P. Roppolo, in his article "Uncle Tom in New Orleans: Three Lost Plays" (1954), attempts to explain why these three plays were ineffective, referring to them as "literary answers to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (225). What Roppolo overlooks in his rather limited analysis is that these were not just literary texts; they were scripts that were performed with live bodies in front of other live bodies. Even if the scripts no longer exist, even if we must reconstruct the essence of these performances through limited reviews, articles, and histories, in that act of transmission meaning gets made. In that act of making meaning, effective progress is made as a community is formed or a response is articulated.

The theatrical responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* staged in New Orleans also marked an important shift in the development of Southern drama from nationalism to sectionalism. Not only did these pieces mark a move away from a nationalist sensibility, in which the nation stood in for the South, towards a bolder and more overtly even militantly regional one by means of its pro-slavery position, but, ironically, they

presented some of the first depictions, though obviously distorted, of “black life” outside of the minstrel shows (Watson 61-2). Rather than representing the nation as playwrights had done in Charleston and Virginia, these New Orleans pieces necessarily delighted in presenting a distinctly Southern view of the world that parodied and lambasted Northern culture, in particular Abolitionists and devoted Stowites, and argued for the existence of a unique, separate Southern culture. Within these attempts to “accurately” portray the distinctiveness of Southern life, the characters of the minstrel show became central figures of the burlesques, taking center stage and recasting the slave system in a favorable light.

Over the course of the three months these burlesques graced the stages of New Orleans, Congress was grappling with the issue of slavery as well. Almost to the day that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Or, Life in The South As It Is* opened at Rice’s Amphitheatre (February 15th, 1854), Stephen Douglas, a senator from Illinois, introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Bill before the Senate. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill outlined a plan by which a new territory of the United States would be able to decide for itself whether or not it would accept slavery. It overturned the Missouri Compromise which had essentially put an end to slavery in the territories. This bill created two new territories, Kansas and Nebraska, and gave Southerners the hope that the government might declare the slavery issue a state’s right to decide. Just two days after the Senate passed the bill and sent it on to the House of Representatives, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Louisiana* opened (March 6th, 1854). *The Old Plantation: Or, Uncle Tom As He Is* (April 6th, 1854) premiered over a month before President Pierce signed the bill into law on May 30th of 1854. Although some expressed skepticism, the three burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the passage

of the Kansas-Nebraska act when viewed together created for a brief moment, only about five years from Civil War, the possibility that things might work themselves out for the slave-holding South and that the racist institution of slavery may, in fact, survive. For those audience members, many must have felt a certain level of empowerment that their identities as Southerners, so perilously connected to slavery, that they had cultivated and tested, tried out and reshaped, might actually begin to have material consequence within their own world and affect national politics. Out of the pestilence of the Yellow Fever epidemic and the sporadic crime waves, those pro-slavery New Orleans residents must have grasped at least a few moments of hope afforded them through their experiences as audiences to live theatre before the consequences of their beliefs would, in part, lead them into the bloody, regional conflict of The Civil War.

Chapter Two

“Appalachian Memories Keep Me Strong”:

Medicine Shows and the Marketing of Region

The most beautiful one is when you hit one of these mountain towns down in the ravine, down in where's the ground levels off. We set it up out there and you look at it. And I've often wondered, you know, all that background mountain coming up you know along the sides and all that beautiful...you don't see anybody. Maybe one little store up yonder and the post office is in the store. And a gas station, now one is your pump. That was all that were in the town. And I can.... The beatifulest [sic] thing that I've often thought about is at night, when about just at sun down, getting dark, is to watch them mountaineers coming down out of them mountains for the show. When it gets dark, that whole side of that mountain is lit up with little firebugs, it looks like. Everybody's got his own lantern. He's coming from all through them mountains. You see them flashing and going behind trees. That's what makes it look like that, with these lanterns. And they's all coming down to the show. And they came down to the show. Then the funny part about it, when that first night, it's not going to get crowd up [sic] to that stage because he don't know you too good. “You one of them show fellers.” That's what they called you, “them show fellers.” “I don't trust you too much,” you know. And then you have to work two nights real hard. I mean double hard before I break them. And when you break the crowd, and I get them in my hand, I can go out there and say, “Good morning gentlemens,” and they'd laugh five minutes.

– Julian “Greasy” Medlin, from interview in documentary,
Free Show Tonight (1983)

Medicine show performer Julian “Greasy” Medlin’s description of the arrival of an audience to an Appalachian medicine show in the early 1930s speaks to the relationship between the theatrical form and the local landscape and its inhabitants. Medlin’s perspective as a performer, an outsider, visiting the region reveals the juxtaposition of the natural, bucolic setting and the established patterns of life with the visiting show. The account hints that the interaction between performer and audience was not always a congenial one. In these performances, both sides entered into negotiations over representation and identity in front of the backdrop of both the mountains and modernization. Medicine Shows in Southern Appalachia fostered the live enactment of struggles between outside representations of Appalachia and the audience’s understanding of their own identities. Ultimately the medicine show, like the three burlesques of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in New Orleans in the summer of 1854, provided an opportunity for those in attendance to perform their roles, assert their agency, and define or redefine themselves along with or against outside attempts to brand and characterize them.

The Appalachian region has long defied attempts at definition. As Jeff Biggers states in *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America* (2006), Appalachia has “been more a process than a place” (xiv). Its seemingly elusive nature led some historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to categorize the region as merely a product of the social imagination, a place existing only in myth and legend. Yet as Biggers reminds, “Appalachia does exist, both as a range and as a region” (xiv). At its most basic,

Appalachia refers to the area of land “from Southern New York to northern Mississippi” that runs along the Appalachian Mountain Range (xv). For the purposes of this project, I define Southern Appalachia, similarly to Biggers, as “that mountain spine and its valley tributaries that trundle along the eastern Southern states from northern Alabama to southwestern Pennsylvania” (xv). However, defining the region and its inhabitants, the “process” Biggers refers to, proves a much more difficult task, one that medicine show performances participated in and countless historians, writers, and social scientists have attempted throughout the last two centuries.

In his 1913 treatise, “Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of Life Among the Mountaineers,” naturalist and librarian Horace Kephart describes his “first sojourn” traveling through the Southern Appalachian region. As a native Pennsylvanian, Kephart’s work takes on a decidedly sociological, almost anthropological tone as he describes the region and its people and his increasing fondness for both. Yet throughout, despite the closeness he feels for those he encounters, Appalachia remains at a certain distance for him. While emphasizing how “the mountaineers of the South” remain “marked apart from all other folks by dialect, by customs, by character, by self-conscious isolation,” he supports the validity of his claim by offering that “they call all outsiders ‘furriners’” (16). Kephart explains that outsider refers to anyone not from the mountains regardless “whether your decent be from Puritan or Cavalier, whether you come from Boston or Chicago, Savannah or New Orleans” (16-17). For Kephart, and many other writers of the early twentieth century, the reason for this attitude lay in the isolated nature of the region itself. As he remarks, “no one can understand the attitude of our highlanders towards the rest of the earth until he realizes

their amazing isolation from all that lies beyond the blue, hazy skyline of their mountains” (17). This isolation required Kephart and other interested journalists of the day to infiltrate the region to conduct elaborate month – or sometimes year-long studies of the region, traversing these “foreign” landscapes and interacting with its people.

Kephart’s reports from the field document a region in transition. He quotes Appalachian native Miss Emma Miles, author of *The Spirit of the Mountains* (1905), who proclaims “there is no such thing as a community of mountaineers” (384). For Miles, although individual relationships and kinships exist, they only exist in isolation from one another making any “concerted” or even collective action nearly impossible (384). Miles calls for mountaineers to “awake to a consciousness of themselves as a people” and refuse to remain “a race without knowledge of its own existence” (384). Miles, unlike Kephart, refuses to locate the reason for this isolation solely in the landscape itself. For her, the isolation is the result of individual actions that only appear to be necessitated by the perceived demands of Appalachia existence. By embracing the idea of shared traits and characteristics, Miles believes that Appalachians might then be able to conceive of themselves as a collective unit. Furthermore, Miles argues that once they “shall have established a unity of thought corresponding to their homogeneity of character,” they will then prove themselves loyal patriots in such a way that America “can boast no stronger sons than these same mountaineers” (384). In other words, while they must identify as a cohesive community to demonstrate their patriotism, more importantly as a result the region might gain a sense of self that would provide them more political power on a national scale.

Studies such as Kephart's and other journalists' contributed to a narrative of discovery that dominated writings about the Appalachia region for much of the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Kephart frequently refers to his area of research as "a mysterious realm" and as "*terra incognita*" while describing his project as one of "unearthing" and "exploration" (Kephart 13, 14, 27). Henry Shapiro, in his influential book *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (1978), locates this "discovery" of Appalachia within new middle-class magazines that "flourished in the years following the Civil War, in the context of an emerging literature of local color" (Shapiro 5-6). Articles appeared that detailed peculiar traditions, practices, and rituals and that celebrated the unique, untouched, and untamed nature of the region in opposition to the rest of the United States. While constructing these exceptional narratives, these articles also had to grapple with the question of how Appalachia culture fit within larger American culture. Interestingly, this discovery of the region also occurs simultaneously with a recognition and subsequent systematic industrial development of the region's vast resources such as coal and lumber. But as Shapiro emphasizes, while industrial growth did increasingly draw attention to the region, what "Americans saw in the mountains was not the usual but the unusual, not progress but its opposite: a strange land and peculiar people" (6).

Shapiro's work exemplifies the difficulties involved in trying to encapsulate the Appalachian region and reconcile its existence within and alongside American culture, tensions that emerged again and again on the medicine show stage. Shapiro complicates traditional definitions of Appalachia that rely on geography – which identify Appalachia as the Blue Ridge, the Ridge and Valley section, and the Cumberland-Allegheny

Highlands – by introducing the concept of region. Detailing the various forces at play in the process of addressing the region illustrates the active processes of identification occurring both within and outside of the Appalachia. Shapiro situates Appalachia and the struggle for its identity as the chief site of development for the concept of region. Rather than fixing Appalachia as a specific place, he locates it as an “idea” or a “concept” capable of change and flexibility (ix).

The process of writing “Appalachian discovery” necessitated a change in the idea of the region which previously had been defined “exclusively by location, as ‘the central South,’ or more frequently, was not defined at all” (Shapiro 267-68). In a later essay, Shapiro cites the treatment of Appalachia by turn of the century historians as the foundational moment for regional studies. Defining the Appalachian region, as the twentieth century progressed, became intrinsically tied to growing ideas of modernization and industry and to attempts to claim a national citizenry. As awareness of Appalachia culture grew, its distinctive “otherness,” typified through its timeless quality, antiquated traditions, pervasive isolation, and “primitive patterns of social and economic organization,” required a new understanding of region as not simply location. This apparent anomaly could not be explained by racial, ethnic, or chronological difference. The presence of Appalachian culture “seemed to challenge the assumptions of American unity and homogeneity” and call into question American ideas of “progress and prosperity” (268). The use of the term region represented an attempt to encapsulate Appalachian otherness and make it more digestible to the American public at the turn of the century. Yet rather than just containing and codifying Appalachian otherness, in the nineteen twenties this new terminology of region was used to reveal significant changes

that aligned the region more directly with the United States including the increased presence of industry and manufacturing.

The failure of the region to accomplish any such unification, like that suggested by Miles in *The Spirit of the Mountains*, allowed for those outside of the region to define Appalachia in whatever way best suit their needs. Appalachian otherness contained within the terminology of region became a strategy industry and other forces of modernization could adopt to facilitate and justify their own endeavors. Historian Jeff Biggers outlines the various representations of Appalachians that entered the national imaginary at the beginning of the twentieth century: *pristine Appalachia*, *backwater Appalachia*, *Anglo-Saxon Appalachia*, and *pitiful Appalachia* (xii-xiii). *Pristine Appalachia* refers to “the unspoiled mountains and hills” while ignoring such factors as the destruction of forests by timber companies and the decimation of strip mining (xii). *Backwater Appalachia* presents the region as the home of strange and peculiar people popularized in stories, novels, radio, and television such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Lil’ Abner* while disregarding that it “has produced some of the most important writers, artists, scientists, and politicians in the country” (xii). According to Biggers, as the Webster’s Collegiate dictionary once defined it, *Anglo-Saxon Appalachia* refers to “a mountain region of ‘white native’” (xii). Such a definition overlooks the important role the region played in African American migration and its own rich heritage of indigenous cultures. Finally, *pitiful Appalachia* positions Appalachia as “the poster region of welfare and privation” while forgetting the “tremendous wealth generated by the mountain range’s mineral resources, timber, and labor force in the mines, mills, and factories” (xii).

These various notions of Appalachia come into play in a variety of contexts depending upon the situation and those in control. For example, when outside developers wanted to tap into the area's bounteous timber resources in the early twentieth century, many industrial leaders painted Appalachia as *backwater* to convey its perceived need for modernization that could be brought about through an increased presence of manufacturing. As late as 1976, scholars continued to tread in this familiar territory. In his book detailing the Buffalo Creek mining dam disaster of the 1970s, preeminent Yale sociologist Kai Erikson judged mountain life and more specifically Appalachian culture for "breeding a social order without philosophy or art or even the rudest form of letters," "bringing out whatever capacity for superstition and credulity a people come endowed with," and encouraging "an almost reckless individualism" (Erikson 60).

Yet as seen in the writings of Emma Miles, Appalachia had already begun to question this perceived fervent individualism as early as 1905. The "discovery" of Appalachia coupled with the advent of modernization and its various processes throughout the United States at the turn of the twentieth century led the region to undergo major shifts in its identity. Between 1880 and 1930, the Appalachian region experienced unprecedented industrial growth with the arrival of lumber, coal, and other manufacturing companies in the region. By 1890, a series of new railroad corridors connected Appalachia to the rest of the nation's transportation system. As these rail corridors developed, towns emerged alongside that "became enclaves of mainstream American mercantile culture, complete with schools, churches, and stores usually little different from similar institutions in the small towns in the rest of the nation" (Drake 133). Although other industries existed within the region, coal reigned supreme. According to

Richard B. Drake's *A History of Appalachia*, Appalachia "has been the major supplier of coal to the nation" since the American Revolution (139). Within the narratives of Appalachian discovery, found in books, newspapers, and periodicals throughout the country, authors included ample evidence of the economic potential of the region's natural resources, often including specific locations of coal fields. As a result, industrialists came to see Appalachia as an untapped resource and potential fuel for the processes of modernization.

The sudden presence of industry called into question previous notions of Appalachian and Southern identity on the local and national level and challenged previous ideas of isolationism and primitivism cultivated by both outside observer and local resident. The coal industry brought countless people seeking work from throughout America to Appalachia. Relocating workers to company coal settlements, alongside already established Appalachian towns, brought different cultures into conflict. Large numbers of African American workers moved into the region often leading to racial discord. Drake notes that in the Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee regions of Appalachia, black labor was used predominantly whereas in the Kentucky and Virginia regions a more "judicious mixture" was employed. In the later case, company owners felt an even mix of "blacks, native whites, and foreign-born whites" might "balance" and "keep labor most easily controlled and docile" (Drake 143). Such company owners may have been responding to incidents of racial violence similar to those W. Fitzhugh Brundage recounts in his *Racial Violence, Lynchings, and Modernization in the Mountain South*. According to Brundage, rural industrialization "wherever it took place, was a catalyst for racial antagonisms" (312). The combination of black workers entering the

coal and lumber industries and the strains and stresses imposed on local industry by the arrival of these large companies led to increasing hostility with local white communities affected by these processes of modernization. Racial violence most often took the form of elaborate, gruesome lynchings meant to provide a message of fear to the entire community. While racial violence waned around the turn of the twentieth century, the early nineteenth hundreds saw occasional flurries of hostility often due to continued struggles over industrialization as black and white worked alongside one another. As Brundage states, even after “racial etiquette in the region was codified in law and practice” and “racial geography of the region was stabilized,” racial conflict would still occur “most often inflamed by mine and mill operators anxious to stymie unions and suppress strikes” (313). Owners would often incite racial violence by bringing in black workers to replace striking white workers. The arrival of industry and its subsequent effects on population patterns and living conditions necessitated a reconsideration by those living, day to day in the region of what it meant to be a Southern Appalachian.

This process of reconsideration and adjustment took on many forms. For some, industrialization brought with it new opportunities and excitement. For others, modernization was an unwelcome infiltrating force that made their lives increasingly difficult to maintain. Crandall A. Shifflett in his book *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* characterizes Appalachia’s encounter with industrialization as a struggle “to preserve their way of life, not by resisting change but by accommodating themselves to it” (6). This process of accommodation often came at the expense of tradition or livelihood as companies quickly picked up on this tendency within the Appalachian community. As Paul Salstrom writes

at the beginning of his book *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940*, “as of 1840, Southern Appalachia figured as one of the most self-sufficient regions of the United States. By 1940 it had become one of the country’s *least* self-sufficient regions” (xiii). The story of this transition from sufficiency to deficiency at the hands of the forces of modernization pulls Appalachia into the larger narrative of American history. Just as the region embraced (whether forcefully or not) modernization and began to see the prosperity it can bring, the Great Depression quickly reminded Appalachians that they were now, as they had never really been before, intrinsically tied to the larger nation and in turn would now suffer economic hardship alongside the rest of the country.

For the people of Southern Appalachia, these processes of reidentification with their surroundings fueled by the pervasive social and economic upheaval in the region were expressed in a variety of ways. Lynchings and other racial violence, such as those outlined previously, provided one horrific expression of these tensions. Strikes and labor unrest offered another manifestation of these tensions as workers, feeling entitled to higher wages or angered by their working conditions, staged walk outs in protest. These strikes, occurring in cotton mills and coal mines throughout the Appalachian region, contained a “staggering level of bloodshed” as forces clashed over how the industrial complex fit into the region’s surrounding and established way of life (Biggers 156). Workers fought against the increasing presence in factories of the machine, the physical manifestation of modernization that threatened to render them obsolete.

Theatre provided an outlet for staging these tensions, enacting multifaceted, localized debates and defining and redefining what it meant to be both Southern and

Appalachian. Between the 1860s and the 1920s, the period of rapid industrial growth in Appalachia, opera houses appeared in many towns. It is no coincidence that the height of opera house construction happened alongside the increasing presence of manufacturing as populations increased and the nature of industrial work allowed for greater leisure time. The opera house rarely, if ever, presented actual opera but instead, according to theatre scholar William Condee in *Coal and Culture: Opera Houses in Appalachia* (2005), provided a “community entertainment and meeting hall” that mostly housed “traveling productions...of contemporary and classical drama, melodrama, comedy, musicals, vaudeville...concerts, religious events, lectures, high school commencements, boxing matches,” benefits, and sporting events (5-6). These venues provided Appalachia towns with a multipurpose facility conceived by their owners to facilitate community activities and foster communal experiences. The term “opera house” also speaks to the pervading cultural currents surrounding modernization. Opera house was the chosen term to convey a “social and cultural respectability” for the venue and to distance it from the more suspect theatre, remnants of the ever pervasive strands of anti-theatricality present in the United States, primarily in rural areas, since the Colonial period (6). The opera house became a place where Appalachians could gather to glimpse a vision of the outside world as seen through the eyes of a traveling vaudeville show or a religious lecturer.

While the opera house provided a venue for traveling shows and community activities, the traveling medicine show offered Appalachians an opportunity not only to witness but also to participate in live performance that directly commented on the changing landscape and other implications of modernization. Even though medicine shows sometimes performed within Appalachian opera houses, they more often took their

performances to their audiences setting up tents in fields or public spaces, transforming known locations and natural settings into performance sites. As the Medline passage illustrates at the beginning of this chapter, the Appalachian town's geography and their inhabitants was particularly striking to many of these performers and critical to crafting performances to suit these audiences. Borrowing from existing debates raging both locally and nationally over location, space, and region while employing rhetoric, identification, and participation, these shows attracted and interpellated Appalachian audiences through offering them opportunities to respond to the changing world around them.

In turn, the inhabitants of Appalachia, in response to all of the attempts from outside interlopers to discover and define the region and its people, found in medicine shows their own ways of responding to the growing national debate and the changing composition of their towns. Medicine shows, through their use of direct audience participation and interaction and their reliance on and manipulation of understandings of consumerism and modernization, provided one way Appalachians could directly contribute to the processes of self-identification and self-construction.

Similar to opera houses, medicine shows reached their height of popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, peaking in number in the South in the nineteen twenties just before the Great Depression. Although a nationwide phenomenon, medicine shows remained particularly popular in the Southern United States. They traveled throughout the South and brought urban ideas and practices, such as sophisticated advertising campaigns and increased standards of cleanliness, to rural areas, forcing audiences to reassess their Southern identities. Using performance as a means to

sell a variety of quasi-medicinal products, medicine shows drew from a variety of popular performance traditions including minstrelsy, vaudeville, and burlesque. Medicine show performers erected small wooden stages in the center of town, often an extension of the carts (or eventually trucks) on which they rode into town, on which they would stage their pitch for products like Kickapoo Indian Remedy, Snake Oil, or Women's Friend. They presented characters that relied on an audience's shared understanding of Southern stereotype and theatrical stock characters such as melodrama's Noble Savage, a peaceful Native American in touch with nature, the Tent show's Toby the "carrot-topped rustic," and various minstrel show characters like Sambo, the happy, mischievous, and I slave. In addition to more formal pitches, medicine shows also offered free evenings of performance as further enticement to purchase their products. Underneath large canvas tents similar to those of the Christian revival or early circus, medicine show performers presented evenings of variety performance comprised of skits, audience contests (like the ever popular female nail driving competition), and local talent competitions. Audiences actively engaged with these performances both through physical (sitting in audiences, performing in talent shows, etc.) and financial (purchasing tickets, buying products, etc.) participation.

Medicine shows, like burlesque, were not an indigenous American performance tradition. The form, according to Marshall Wyatt in the extensive liner notes for "Good for What Ails You: Music of the Medicine Shows" (2005), traces its history back to the Italian Renaissance and the mountebank (literary "one who mounts a bench") (Wyatt 4). Mountebanks were roving medicine sellers who sold their wares to unsuspecting peasants using incredible claims and a variety of entertainments including musicians, acrobats, and

clowns (4). The term “patent medicine” often used to describe the various elixirs and tonics sold via medicine shows came into use after English mountebanks applied for patents for their nostrums from the Royal Patent Office. Once the practices of the European mountebanks reached the United States, the term patent medicine was being used to describe all manufactured medicine, patented or not. In Colonial America, medicine peddlers incorporated magic, hypnotism, exotic animals, and trick shooting alongside music and singing and drew the ire of some government officials due to their large number and threat to “the health and morals of the unwary citizen” (McNamara 7). Despite legislation in Connecticut and New Jersey, these peddlers continued to sell their concoctions, sometimes illegally, and to offer alternative to familial home remedies (Wyatt 4-5).

As the nineteenth century progressed and advancements were made in the areas of communication and travel, the patent medicine business expanded exponentially and, in turn, so did the medicine show. Newspapers provided an ideal outlet for advertisements promoting a variety of products including “tonics, liniments, laxatives, blood bitters, dyspepsia pills, liver pads, electric belts, and cures for ‘female weakness’” (Wyatt 5). Companies that manufactured these patent medicines saw the medicine show, in addition to various print media, as an excellent way to promote and sell their products and financed large scale medicine shows to tour the country. As William P. Burt details in his 1942 article “Back Stage with the Medicine Show Fifty Years Later,” initially medicine shows

were advertising units for standard brands of medicines put out by established drug houses. Later came the stocking of medicine shows with

a line of cure-alls – on an outright commission basis – by the same drug companies, then came the boys who ‘rolled out their own’ and some were not very careful about what they ‘rolled’. (Burt 127)

The “boys” Burt mentions here refer to the large number of individuals who took up the medicine show trade as independent salespeople rather than drug company employees and who often made their own concoctions rather than purchase them directly from the companies. Thus at any given time, many different medicine shows of varying sizes selling assorted products some homemade some manufactured could be traversing the nation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the medicine show had entrenched itself within the American consciousness, as Dr. N. T. Oliver (aka Nevada Ned) said in a 1929 *Saturday Evening Post* article,

I have no idea what the year 2130 will be like, except that I am sure of three things – death and taxes will operate, the Younger Generation will be viewed with alarm, and ‘Nature’s own remedies’ will be sold on the streets with song and dance and ballyhoo by pitchmen, low and high.
(Oliver 12)

Oliver’s comments speak to the pervasive nature of the medicine show and its truly national presence.

No matter the size of the company, a typical medicine show broke down into two primary parts: the pitch and the entertainment. How to integrate these two elements into an enjoyable show was the responsibility of the medicine showman, the equivalent of a theatrical producer. The typical medicine show, according to Brooks McNamara in *Step Right Up* (1974, 1995), would last up to two hours “and was made up of eight or ten

selections, including two or three” pitches. Most shows would begin with “a banjo solo or two designed to settle the audience down or a song and dance number featuring the whole cast” followed by a comedy routine, usually “a rapid-fire exchange of jokes and stock bits between the blackface comedian and the straightman,” often the pitch doctor (McNamara 140). Then more music came or a specialty act like “mind-reading, magic, or perhaps a sword swallower or ventriloquist followed by the first pitch and sale of the evening” (140). This first item was usually something rather common, inexpensive, and practical, like soap, in order to get the audience the mood to consume. Following the first pitch, “came another act or two, usually a comic bit and a musical act or specialty number, and the second lecture and sale” after which came another bit or specialty act, then “the prize candy sale,” where participants could win prizes if the piece of candy they bought had a special marking on the wrapper. The show would end with the traditional medicine show afterpiece, [which was] almost invariably” a short, humorous, scripted blackface scene featuring the characters of “Jake, the straightman, and a ghost” intended for the audience to leave in high spirits, so to speak (140). Yet McNamara’s bill only suggests a possible (if not probable) order. Depending upon the size of the medicine show and the number of troupe members, this order could drastically change. Moreover it would also necessarily change based upon the specific location and audience present. No matter what the size or location or audience composition however, the basic components of pitch and entertainments remained.

The pitch was the central component of a medicine show and the chief means of getting information about the medicinal products to audiences. Dr. N. T. Oliver, in his 1929 *Saturday Evening Post* piece, colorfully proclaims that “‘pitch’ and its derivative

'pitchman' come either from the pitch-pine torch under which he once worked by night, before the coming of gasoline flare and the electric light, or from the verb 'to pitch a tent'" (26). According to the glossary of Pitchman's Terms that Brooks McNamara includes at the end of his history of the medicine show, *Step Right Up*, the pitch is defined as the "sales talk to the crowd" (207). A pitch could be either high or low. A high pitch was given from the back of a truck, trailer, or elevated platform placing the individual above the audience and affording the pitch giver a higher level of respectability and larger licensing fees. Famous pitchwoman Violet McNeal wrote that "'high-pitch' medicine men belonged to the aristocracy of the pitch world" and could socialize with circus owners but never carnival or circus performers or "prostitutes, pimps, bartenders...waiters...or thieves" (McNeal 43-44). A low pitch, on the other hand, was given street level placing the individual on equal footing with the audience. The "low pitch" person, according to McNeal, "put his wares on a tripod and stood either on the pavement or a low box" and had to abandon his or her position on a certain street if a high pitch person opted to partake of that location (44). Medicine shows, conscious of the stringent hierarchies of the pitchman profession, adopted the "high-pitch" as part of their larger theatrical structure in an attempt at gaining a level of respectability not afforded to the common "low-pitch" street hustler. Even though the form, according to journalist Malcolm Jones in his *American Scholar* article "Snake Oil Music: On medicine shows and other forms of homemade entertainment" (2006), remained "the bottom rung of American entertainment, a step of two below circuses and dead-even with carnivals," gestures toward respectability and morality were crucial elements in attracting potential consumers (Jones 121).

The pitchmen, often referred to in medicine shows as pitch doctors, delivered the pitch with the primary goal of enticing an audience to purchase the product or products for sale. These speeches often took the form of a theatrical event complete with script, costume, and props. To successfully convince an audience to assume the role of consumer, pitch doctors had to develop sets of skills passed on from one performer to another. The techniques involved psychological trickery and slight of hand. As pitchman Charles S. Mundell related in a 1925 article,

the secret of the pitchman's art (and it is an art) is to make the 'switch' so subtly, so imperceptibly, and so scientifically, that he holds his crowd and carries them along with him. The 'switch' is the pitchman's danger line. The least slip or bungle and his crowd may get wise and walk out . . . he talks anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half, playing upon hopes and fears, the aches and pains, the ignorance and lack of information of his hearers, as dexterously as a harpist plays upon the strings of his instrument, until they are unconsciously 'sold' before they hardly realize what it is all about. (qtd. in Calhoun 57)

The pitch doctors had to concoct a story that would draw their audiences and relate to their specific experiences. They also had to make sure that their performances remained believable or they might lose the audience and in turn lose money and in some cases gain a bruised ego or a black eye.

Pitch doctors created characters that played upon commonly held stereotypes that served to either put their audience at ease, make them feel superior, or impress or bewilder them. While some relied solely on their own presence and vocal prowess to

command audience attention, others impersonated everyone from Quakers and Native Americans to Asian princesses, academics, and frontier scouts (McNamara 431).

Pitchwoman Violet McNeal, in her autobiography entitled *Four White Horses and A Brass Band*, proclaims that medicine men were roughly divided into three categories “the Indian doctors, the ‘Quaker’ doctors, and the Oriental doctors” (51). “Quaker” doctors, so called because “Quakers were understood to be a group activated to a high degree by the motives of gentleness and honesty,” called every one “Thee and Thou and Brother” and “dressed in fawn-colored clothes and wore wide-brimmed, low-crowned beaver hats” (55). McNeal, aside from commenting on the popular pitch trends, also documents her own process of creating her two most well known characters – Princess Lotus Blossom and Madame V. Pasteur. To play Princess Lotus Blossom, McNeal nightly donned a “mandarin coat and little Chinese skull cap,” applied extensive makeup, and told an elaborate tale of a prince mauled by a tiger while hunting who was nursed back to life via a balm, Tiger Fat, created from the chopped up remains of the tiger (75). McNeal would then pitch Vital Sparks, an impotence cure, by telling the tale of when the people of China are saved from potential ruin due to a decline in the birth rate by a remedy made from the “brain pouch” of male turtles (190).

McNeal’s Asian persona played upon contemporary notions of orientalism by presenting the audience with a highly exoticized image of Asian femininity available for consumption alongside the products. Mari Yoshihara, in *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (2003), posits that “the evolution of both U.S.-Asian relations and white women’s social roles in America” pre-WWII “meant changes in white women’s relationship to Orientalism” (7). White women now played the roles of

“consumers, producers, practitioners, critics, and experts” (7). As producers of Orientalism, white women, alongside white men, would have embraced McNeal’s performance as possessing some level of authenticity for it was thought “as gender became an increasingly effective tool with which to understand, negotiate, and represent the complex and intensifying U.S.-Asian relations, white women with material or discursive access to Asia came to play the role of expert authorities in American Orientalism” (8). McNeal’s Asian persona also reads as an attempt to comment on her role as a female in the mostly male dominated form of the medicine show. As Yoshihara asserts, “white women often used Orientalism not only to make their intervention in American ideas about Asia per se but also to assert, address, and/or challenge women’s roles in American society” (8). Until the beginnings of WWII and the subsequent changes in U.S.-Asian relations, McNeal as well as other medicine show performers who performed Asian characters was able to use the persona of Princess Lotus Blossom to both sell product and assert her presence in the business on stage.

Later in her career in another attempt to comment on her presence within the male dominated medicine show, McNeal abandoned her Asian persona and developed the character of Madame V. Pasteur, an erudite professorial type whose costume consisted of academic robes and a mortarboard. Pasteur was a deliberate gesture toward Louise Pasteur in an attempt to suggest a certain level of legitimacy, cleanliness, and safety. Madame Pasteur was a scientist and the pitch included numerous “scientific” demonstrations and tests. Most overtly, McNeal included within her pitch a “masterful tribute to Great Women, speaking well and easily of Elizabeth of England, Catherine of Russia, Isabella of Spain; then shifted to Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besnat. She had

good words for Sarah Bernhardt too” (Holbrook 193-4). She reserved her highest accolades though for Madame Curie celebrating her contributions to science while downplaying Monsieur Curie and essentially blaming him for the accident that cost them their lives (194). Incorporating this tribute alongside the scientific demonstrations, McNeal’s pitch defied the traditional roles of women at the turn of the century and further suggests the potential spaces for political intervention the medicine show format allowed. Unlike the pitches for Tiger Balm and Vital Sparks, this pitch, for an herbal remedy entitled Pure Concentrate of Madame Pasteur’s Herbs, positioned the audience as in on the secret and as the recipients of knowledge.

Other pitch doctors that relied less on costumes and elaborate stories depended upon strong rhetorical stylings that incorporated a sophisticated understanding of psychology. T. P. Kelly, in his most famous pitch, begins by telling the audience “you are all dying, every man, every woman, every child is dying; from the instant you are born you begin to die and the calendar is your executioner” (quoted in McNamara 43). After working the audience into a frenzy of despair at their impending demise, he twists the knife in further by reminding them of death’s inevitability: “It’s nature’s law that there is no escape from the individual great finale on the mighty stage of life where each of you is destined to play your farewell performance” (43). Kelly uses the language of performance to compel the audience to place themselves in the scenario he describes – to confront their own mortality. Just as he has every audience member convinced they will keel over at any moment, he throws out a glimpse of hope in the form of a series of questions: “Is there a logical course to pursue? Is there some way you can delay, and perhaps for years, that final moment before your name is written down by the bony hand

in the cold diary of death?” (43). By this point, Kelly has the audience in the palm of his hand as they wait to hear what wonderful solution he has to offer. It is at this point when Kelly introduces the product as a logical answer to the questions he has posed: “of course there is, Ladies and Gentlemen, and that is why I am here” (43).

Other pitches incorporated strategies to appeal to the audience’s ideal image of themselves. One common form of this style of pitch was to appeal to religion and morality, connecting the processes of consumerism with spiritual practice. In his 1927 *American Mercury* article “Pitch Doctors,” W. A. S. Douglas documents such a pitch:

‘You feel all dressed up of a Sunday, you folks do,’ he orates. ‘You’ve had your bath and cleaned your teeth and you’re going to church to praise God. Do you think God doesn’t see inside of you and doesn’t know all about the filth in there? Of course he does. One bottle of this marvelous remedy of mine and you’ll know God will know that you are worthy to sit in His House.’ (226)

By literally equating cleanliness next to Godliness, this pitch doctors compels the audience to purchase his product as a necessary part of their own religious ritual. The pitch attempts to convince the audience that their lives are not simply better off with this product but ever so much more moral and pure in the eyes of God. Consumerism is thus depicted as a means of soothing the spiritually weary soul.

In addition to religious appeals, another common form of this style of pitch was to assure the audience of their high level of education and common sense. Thomas J Leblanc, in his 1925 *American Mercury* article “The Medicine Show,” recounts such a pitch:

Now folks, I know you are too intelligent and educated to believe all the things I have said without some scientific proof. From your faces I can see that this is an unusually intelligent audience and not like the one we addressed in Freedom last week. (233)

In this example, the pitch doctor flatters the audience by appealing to their intelligence while also highlighting the stupidity of the town they were in previously. The pitch thus creates within the audience a feeling of confidence in the knowledge that they are superior to their neighboring town. That confidence then translates into a willing consumer who wants to prove their intelligence by purchasing the product – a material marker of their higher intellect.

Often times, despite the luxurious costumes, exotic tales, or solid rhetorical structure, the speech alone would not be enough to make a pitch effective and to make an audience, particularly a suspicious Appalachian one, part with its hard earned incomes. For many medicine show audiences, particularly in rural areas such as Appalachia, the price of these remedies easily equaled a week's if not a month's salary. They needed further proof. Pitch doctors provided this evidence in the form of live demonstrations and testimonials. While pitch doctors would sometimes incorporate audience plants to expound on the wonders of the products, the more effective pitches involved demonstrations on actual audience members. Since the majority of the medicines for sale had no actual real medicinal value, medicine showmen developed tricks and illusions to convince audiences of the benefits of these products. These tricks required a pitch doctor with great performance skill and an audience with little to no knowledge of medicine, hence why rural and Appalachian audiences were particularly targeted by medicine

shows throughout their heyday. David Armstrong and Elizabeth Metzger Armstrong's *The Great American Medicine Show* details some of these "tricks of the trade" (175). For demonstrations of products meant to cure arthritis and rheumatism, volunteers "were 'cured' by vigorously rubbing liniment on the afflicted area – say the elbow – which was then pressed hard against the back of a chair" (175). The process of rubbing and pressing temporarily dulled the pain long enough for the "patient" to feel better. Another popular demonstration for deafness remedies required the pitch doctor to rub the outside of the volunteer's ears while inserting a few drops of oil and then inserting their fingertip and removing it quickly to making a "popping" sound. This motion removed enough ear wax to temporarily make the individual believe they had regained their hearing.

Other techniques required a bit more advance preparations. Demonstrations for tapeworm cures required more preplanning as a pitch doctor had to prepare pills ahead of time that had string contained inside them. Upon digestion, the "afflicted" individual would expel the small string and believe the tape worm to have been banished from their system. During the pitch an audience member would then be called upon to recount the intimate processes of his digestive system as proof of their success. Particularly popular in the South, liver pads purportedly cured liver disease. According to Dr. N. T. Oliver (Nevada Ned) in a 1929 *Saturday Evening Post* article, "In the South the liver pad was a sensation" in part because "the emancipated blacks . . . saw in the device an addition to voodoo, a new and potent conjure" (13). Dr. Oliver also specifically cites Texas Charley's pitches, delivered throughout the region, for "putting a liver pad in every cabin" (13). To demonstrate their effectiveness, pitch doctors, like Charley, prepared pads with a spot of red pepper and glue on them. When the pad was applied on the

volunteer to the area of skin directly above the liver, body heat would melt the glue and the pepper would react generating a “comforting warmth” (Armstrong 175).

In general, performances took on the style of variety entertainment, a series of acts not generally connected by a shared theme or idea. While the pitches contained the primary sales presentation, the entertainments’ chief goal was to keep the audiences amused and in the proper spirits to purchase products. The ordering of entertainments in and around the pitches varied greatly across different medicine shows. Some companies opted to intersperse short comic bits and musical performances within their pitches, while others kept the entertainments completely separate. Just as organization differed from show to show so did the types of entertainments. Having to compete with much larger, contemporary popular entertainment traditions like vaudeville, minstrelsy, and burlesque, medicine shows often borrowed heavily and liberally from other performance traditions. As McNamara states, during the early twentieth century in towns across America

vacant lots and village halls were filled with free plays, vaudeville, musical comedy, minstrels, magic, burlesque, dog and pony circuses, Punch and Judy shows, pantomime, menageries, bands, pie-eating contests, and early motion pictures. (IMS 431)

Medicine shows became a place where performers could go once their performance styles went out of commercial favor. For example, many minstrel performers joined up with medicine shows following the decline of minstrelsy at the beginning of the twentieth century which led to the inclusion of many minstrel characters, songs, and bits into the repertoire (Wyatt 8-9). Conversely, medicine shows also provided a location for the development of new talent. The roster of former medicine show performers includes

Jimmie Rodgers, Harry Houdini, W. C. Fields, Red Skelton, Roy Acuff, George Burns and Gracie Allen, George M. Cohan, Minnie Pearl, Chico Marx, Carmen Miranda, and Hank Williams (Armstrong 180). This list shows the variety of performers and performance forms, ranging from musicians and magicians to comedians and dancers.

The process of selecting what types of entertainments to present around or within pitches necessitated an understanding of the medicine show's audience. Since the primary goal was to foster a benevolent atmosphere to encourage purchasing, medicine shows had to be careful to select acts that would either be familiar to their audiences or be guaranteed to entertain rather than anger. As a result, performances often took on regional overtones. For Southern audiences, and audiences in Appalachia, the most likely types of entertainment to be included were the "Toby and Suzy" shows and minstrel skits and songs. Both these forms contained material relating specifically to the region in which the medicine shows were performing and were styles at least somewhat familiar to an audience. The "Toby and Suzy" pieces featured a "carrot-topped rustic named Toby and a gangling country girl with a calico dress and pigtails, known as Suzy or 'The Silly Kid'" (McNamara 132). The character of Toby came from a tradition of Toby shows frequently performed by tent repertory companies. According to W. L. Slout's *Theatre in a Tent*, Toby was always a "redheaded, freckle-faced, country boy dressed in rural attire" who acted "at various time brash, shy shrewd, natively bright, stupid, industrious and lazy" (83). While he was guilty of the occasional prank or other indiscretion, he always "supported the ideals of mother, home, and heaven" (83). Neil E. Schaffner, in *The Fabulous Toby and Me* (1968), while detailing his many years as a

Toby performer calls the character “True Blue” and praises him for “the deep currents of native wit, of cunning and resourcefulness” underneath his “country appearance” (2).

For Southern audiences in Appalachia, Toby took on the characteristics of the hillbilly, but not the stereotypical lazy, ignorant figure imagined by Northern publications. Their Toby “fulfilled, through the agency of make believe, either symbolic or real actions that what would like to have performed themselves had they but dared” and in turn became a comic hero (84). Skits placed Toby in adventures where he would fight against social injustices and rally in support of regional concerns. He, and often his sister or friend Suzy, might be called upon to restore the honor of a female school teacher or fallen minister, expose a corrupt government official, or uphold the rural way of life (96). He and Suzy, in essence, came to stand in for the Appalachian audience members, becoming sort of Huck Finn like characters who could accomplish what they themselves could not. Through their performances on stage, audiences might imagine a better world made so by someone from their own ranks. For medicine show operators, including the characters of Toby and Suzy allowed them the opportunity to equate these well loved characters with their products and even have them serve as sort of spokespersons encouraging business. The addition of Suzy provided Toby with a comic foil and a companion and accomplice in his exploits. While her inability to act like a lady was often the source of comic material, Sally’s perceived innocence and ignorance, similar to Toby, served her well in her adventures.

In accordance with the processes of modernization and consumerism, wherein nostalgia replaces “actual” history to procure profit, both characters would later be co-opted into source material for the *Lil’ Abner* cartoon strip, a chief source of perpetuating

the negative stereotype of the hillbilly (Harkins 125-26). According to Anthony Harkin in *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (2004), representations like those in *Lil' Abner* demonstrated attempts by Northern media to rebrand the Appalachian mountaineer from a “genuine threat and danger, to harmless, if aberrant, comical transgression” making the region safe for industrialization and other modernizing forces (139). These characters remain a contested site of identificatory practice because just as a northern audience viewed them as simple and easily digestible, Southern audiences found pleasure in their refusal to assimilate into modern society and their abilities to make fun of the dominant systems of power. Schaffner contends that “Toby’s enduring favor with audiences was due in large part . . . to the fact that he continued to evolve throughout the years even while giving the impression of never changing” (173). He then provided constancy in a rapidly changing society. Part of what endeared him and Suzy specifically to Appalachian and Southern audiences was his assumption “that the city slicker was the unlettered one” not himself (Schaffner 173).

Along with the Toby and Suzy shows, minstrel skits and songs dominated the bills of medicine shows in Southern Appalachia. Similar to the function of the Toby and Suzy characters, minstrel stock characters would have been familiar to audiences and would have allowed for a similar level of ownership over the representation. The blackface comedian, usually represented by the character of Sambo or Jake, served as the master of ceremonies for the entire show “acting in sketches, introducing specialty numbers, playing the banjo and cracking jokes with the straightman” who was often the pitch doctor (at least in smaller companies) (McNamara 138). He also acted as the “producer” of the show, arranging the order along with the showman and was responsible

for knowing “all of the traditional medicine show material, to reconcile one performer’s vision of a sketch with that of another, and to constantly cut, shape, and organize the bills out of his prodigious memory for acts and bits” (140). Similar to *commedia del arte*, the minstrel skit relied upon oral tradition and borrowed heavily from other forms such as vaudeville, burlesque, ‘legitimate’ theatre, and well established minstrel shows. As a result, few written scripts of these skits existed and companies often had to rely on collective memory. Negotiation and improvisation were critical to presenting a polished performance capable of enticing and audience to part with their hard earned wages. Popular sketches such as “The Photograph Gallery,” “Niagara Falls,” and “Three O’Clock Train,” traded in stereotypes like those in minstrel shows. In “the Photography Gallery,” for example, the straightman, Straight, sets up a scenario to demonstrate the humorous ignorance of blackface comedian, Jake:

Straight: I’ve rigged up a bogus camera and as soon as I can rope someone in, I’ll raise enough money to get out of this town. Here comes someone now.

Jake: I brung ‘em.

Straight: You brought *what*?

Jake: ‘Taters.

Straight: You brought potatoes?

Jake: Yep. I put them in the cellar.

Straight: I didn’t order any potatoes!

Jake: Yes, you did!

Straight: That’s a laugh! Whatever made you think I ordered potatoes?

Jake: I seen it on the sign out there: 'POTATOES TAKEN HERE.'

(McNamara 177)

This skit demonstrates the traditional humor of the minstrel show wherein the audience, as Eric Lott has stated in *Love & Theft* (1993), got to live out their “emotional demands and troubled fantasies” on the bodies of the blackface performers they saw on stage (6).

In the Appalachia of the early twentieth century, industrial forces introduced by increased modernization shifted established social constructions and led to tensions similar to those offered by Lott. The minstrel form, as it had for the previous generation, provided a theatrical means of expressing these anxieties around race and class. Minstrelsy had begun in the nineteenth century, according to Lott, “out of primarily working-class rituals of racial interaction” suggesting “that blackface performance reproduced or instantiated a structured relationship between the races” (48). Laughing at representations of ignorant blacks allowed white, primarily working-class audiences to release tensions amassed through the changing social dynamics and racial makeup of their communities due to the influx of industry and other social forces. First and foremost among these tensions was an attraction to or deep fascination with African Americans, hence the “love” in *Love & Theft*. Following this logic, medicine show performers then used minstrel traditions in their acts to afford their white audience members the opportunity to release these tensions and, in turn, become affable consumers who might actually purchase a product that would then allow them to remember their attraction after the show.

Yet Lott’s assessment of minstrelsy in which “interracial solidarity points to class” through “mocking elite hypocrisy and power” and “expressing an exuberant,

democratic culture” resulting in the authorization “of a black place to stand” fails to account for the consequences of such a system (Rogin 36). Michael Rogin in *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1998), chastises Lott for not considering that minstrelsy resulted in “the exclusion of actual African Americans from their own representations” and for not recognizing the preponderance of “the grotesque, demeaning, animalistic blackface mask” (37). Following Rogin’s reasoning, the minstrel elements might then have demarcated the medicine show as a white performance form that disseminated ideas of white racial superiority and political power. Thus medicine shows then could be read as a white form aiming to foster feelings of superiority in their audience to compel them to assert their purchasing power and demonstrate their authority.

Borrowing both from Lott and Rogin, a consideration of the “Photography” sketch reveals the stakes present when both black and white audience members were present in the audience. In the skit, the audience member witnessed someone being duped in hopes that they will disidentify with the rube and assert their consumer confidence and superior intelligence by purchasing products. The skits provided yet another way the medicine shows could use performance to convince audiences to purchase remedies by appealing to their own vanity and ideal image of themselves. Presenting a lack of economic power within the context of race also allowed medicine shows to create scenarios that avoided class, and in turn poverty, and positioned all white people as potential consumers and the process of purchasing as a way of demonstrating racial superiority. Yet this strategy is complicated when considering the large amount of African Americans that attended medicine show performances. For those African

Americans in attendance, such skits compelled them to use their purchasing power to distinguish themselves from the representations enacted onstage.

The close proximity of black and white performers both onstage and off certainly could have affected audience's perceptions of race, particularly in a rapidly desegregating region like Appalachia. In an Appalachian context, the issue of race in the medicine show, as in minstrelsy, altered the circumstances of identification and representation particularly since blacks and whites both sat next to each other in the audience and performed next to one another on stage. Jones, in an article on snake oil music, states that even though medicine shows were "secular" and "humorous" and "sometimes raunchy and racist," it's important to remember that "the medicine show was one of the few places, certainly in the South, where blacks and whites performed, and traveled, on a more or less equal footing" (122). Accounts of medicine show performers seem to hint at the complicated racial nature of these performances. In the documentary *Free Show Tonight* (1983), Anna Noell, wife of former blackface performer Bob Noell, tells of the specific moment, one night in the early nineteen thirties in Kenansville, North Carolina when Bob decided never to appear onstage in blackface again:

We were showing and it was back in the days when you had to have a chain down the middle of your lot so the white folks could be on one side and the Black folks on the other side. And we wanted all our customers to see our show the same . . . Bob put the black on and we went up on the platform doing the black face act. And in the middle of the act I said, 'Bob, Bob' and when we looked up all of the Black people were walking off the lot . . . Bob made the remark when we came off stage that night . . .

‘I’ll never put cork on again. If it hurts anybody’s feelings like that, that’s not what it was intended for so I’ll never do it again.’ And he didn’t. (5)

It’s important to note that while Noell tells this story about her husband in the documentary, the camera focuses on him as he applies blackface for the first time since the incident. Her commentary paints the decision to abandon blackface as a benevolent act coming out of a desire not to cause anyone pain. While they may have the best of intentions, one can not forget that getting rid of blackface was also an astute business decision. Having half of your audience leave before all the pitches could be made meant a significant hit to profits. Their stated justifications also suggest that there is nothing inherently wrong with blackface, but with an audience who cannot get the joke. Anna Noell goes on to speak of the loss of Jake, the blackface character, as if “somebody had died” and remarks, once her husband has completed applying the makeup that “its beautiful, it really is” (6). This story illustrates the often thorny relationship between the performer and the audience that emerges over issues such as race.

Unlike the Noells who felt compelled to tackle the issue of racial embodiment onstage as a result of audience response, George Walker, a black medicine show performer, could not avoid the perpetual presence of race and bemoaned the state of racial representation within the form. When asked about the persistence of blackface on the medicine show stage, Walker replied:

I was often much amused at seeing white men wear black cork on their faces trying to imitate Black folk. Black face White comedians used to make themselves look as ridiculous as they could when portraying a darker character. The one fatal result of this to the colored performer was

that they [then] imitated the white performer. Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man make himself seem ridiculous in order to portray himself. The white comedian who blacked up stood in the way of the natural Black performer. (Free Show Tonight 6)

Walker saw the preponderance of blackface in medicine shows as a hindrance to future African American participation in the form. So despite the potential progressive moment of seeing black and white on stage together, one must remember the agency of the performers themselves. Just because an African-American male performs alongside a white male does not necessarily eliminate all traces of racism. Economic forces, those that the medicine shows celebrated and encouraged nightly, often led individuals to take jobs counter to their best interests so that they could survive financially. After all, making a living as a performer on the medicine show circuit, although tough, afforded a certainly stability albeit sometimes bleak. As pitch doctor Julian “Greasy” Medlin recounted, “it was hard . . . I never went hungry too much, but now I’d lie if I said I didn’t go hungry” (*Free Show Tonight* 11). Medicine shows, in particular, with their omnipresent consumer framework and focus on economic exchange, placed these issues front and center for both audience and performer alike.

The greatest evidence that the audience’s moment of choice, to buy or not to buy, was the medicine show’s chief concern is the number of techniques and practices employed to encourage their decision to spend. In addition to the determinations around the pitch and entertainments, showmen incorporated other devices to draw in the audience. Some shows offered contests, giveaways, and amateur nights as a way of fostering excitement. These events allowed the community to watch itself perform,

celebrate its achievements, and witness its own representation of itself. Contests ranged from naming the “most beautiful” or “most popular” to more elaborate productions like women’s nail-driving and wood-sawing contests or children’s pie-eating competitions. Often, these contests would run over a number of nights with the final tabulation of votes happening on the final night in order to build suspense. The winners, as McNamara states, were “called to the stage to receive [their] silver-plated tea set or Indian blanket to the enthusiastic applause of friends and neighbors” (146). Giveaways likewise provided a way to involve local people in the show. One giveaway involved the awarding of a baby bottle filled with milk and a five dollar bill to the youngest married couple in attendance. Other giveaways involved specially marked products that yielded their holder a free gold watch (146). Amateur nights allowed local community members the opportunity to perform onstage in front of their friends and neighbors for the opportunity to win small cash prizes or various trinkets. These acts mirrored vaudeville in many ways ranging from “hymn singers and amateur animal acts” to “the perennial recitations and bird call imitations” (146). Allowing locals the chance to appear on stage increased the community feel of the event and blurred the boundaries between performer and audience.

Medicine show proprietors also bridged the audience/performer divide through the design of the stage itself. Anna Mae Noell’s sketch in the Fall 1984 *Drama Review* shows the layout her father used throughout his career. The chief component of the staging was a long wooden runway (about 30 feet long) that extended from the center of the stage into the audience and provided an elevated platform from which to deliver the high pitch. This ramp allowed the pitch doctor and other performers easier access to the

audience and, in turn, allowed the audience easier access to the performers. For example, Noell speaks of a song her and her father used to sing called “The Audience Song” that involved them joking with people in the audience:

There sits a fellow, ‘way back there
In the fifth row and in the third chair
Pants rolled up so his socks can be seen
I’ll betcha five dollars that his feet ain’t clean.

...

There stands a couple right over there
Ain’t gonna tell ya just exactly where
Betcha five dollars that the girl don’t know

The boy borrowed money to buy candy at the show! (Noell 27-8)

The runway allowed them not only to get a better view of the audience but also to go out into the audience and sing directly to the people they reference. This set up was also thought to encourage customers wanting to buy products by drawing the audience closer into the performance and allowing them the opportunity to purchase products at any time without completely interrupting the show. The runway also served to breakdown the traditional theatrical bifurcations of audience and performer and audience and stage in this case to encourage financial exchanges.

Further extending the performance beyond the traditional stage space, many medicine shows also dispersed trade advertising cards. These cards were created by patent medicine companies and handed out during the shows to provide purchasers a kind of souvenir of their consumer experience, whether they purchased the product or not.

They depict a variety of images from young children at play to animals and infants. These cards were widely collected by those who attended medicine shows and, according to McNamara, “were often pasted into albums, many of which survive today in museums and private collections” illustrating the important role these cards played in their lives (106a). Susan Stewart, in her book *On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, comments on how the souvenir performs:

The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of original. It represents not the lived experience of its maker but the ‘secondhand’ experience of its possessor/owner. (Stewart 135)

These medicine cards came to stand in for the experience these individuals had at the medicine shows long after the performance ended. While the actual product, be it soap, salve, or ointment, may be used up or discarded, the card was preserved. McNamara’s description of the scrapbooks of cards he encountered during his research, speaks to the care with which individuals kept these material artifacts and the importance these collections had in their lives. The cards reminded the holder of the embodied experiences they had as consumers and performers and attempted to capture the ephemeral and halt a transient performance form. The owner could look at the card to remind them of a particular act or song they enjoyed. The cards also reminded the individual of their

previous role of consumer while continually conditioning them, upon every glance at that card, for their next opportunity to spend. For the medicine company, the cards provided a constant reminder of their product within the consumer's home and familiarized and normalized their audience/customer base with commodification.

The many techniques and practices used by medicine shows, such as the collectable cards and stage configuration, imbued the audience with a great amount of power. With seats filled with potential customers, medicine shows had to contour every element to captivate and hold their audience's attention and convince them that they could not live without their products. If an audience even slightly suspected that they might have been had, the result could be a medicine show being run out of town or even physical violence. The typical audience for a medicine show came from immediate surrounding areas and despite a desire to attract a more economically diverse audience was primarily lower class: mill hands, farmers, shopkeepers, and other laborers (LeBlanc 233). In his 1925 article "The Medicine Show," Thomas J. LeBlanc speaks about the enduring appeal of the medicine show and of the audiences it attracts:

It was our one spot of drama, a stage that was open to everyone. The round-shouldered lumber handlers from the mills, the dull and stupid farmers from the countryside and the poor people from across the railroad tracks – all of them came, for here was one form of pleasure they could afford. (235)

LeBlanc's description emphasizes the range of occupations while highlighting the shared economic conditions.

In Appalachia, this range is of particular importance as the medicine show became one location where the rural, preexisting farming community came face to face with the newly-arrived industrial laborers lured to the mountains by the promise of employment. Old and new ways of life came together in the performance space. Some shows even targeted newly formed coal camps, setting up stages in these new settlements on or around payday and enticing rural farmers to venture out of their comfort zones. Women also attended both alone and with their families including, according to LeBlanc, those “short pudgy Polish women, so accustomed to carrying children that they always leaned backwards” (235). Winfred Johnson, in her 1936 article “Medicine Show” in *The Southwest Review*, describes a typical audience composition: “there are old men with stubble on their chins; old and young couples with their arms around each other; boys and girls running up and down the aisles to the near-by ice cream stand; mothers and fretful babies” (397). Medicine show audiences, both male and female, black and white, attended because it provided a break from the monotony and insularity of their everyday lives:

The medicine show was the one breath of romance, the one touch of lands across the sea that invaded the isolation of our remote little town. The light from the torches was reflected from eyes that were only too seldom opened wide in interest and pleasure. It was a splash of color and strange movement against a dull and drab background. (243)

For rural audiences, like those in Appalachia, a medicine show might be the only “professional” entertainment to travel to that region in a given year and almost certainly

the only free one. That sense of event was important for the audience to anticipate and the medicine show to manipulate.

Even though the audience was comprised primarily of individuals from similar economic conditions, their reactions to the shows themselves differed greatly. Configured as potential consumers, the audience had more power in this performance context than in other contemporary forms. Since they had not purchased tickets for the most part, audiences may have been more inclined to accept a lower level of quality or they may have felt the freedom to leave if they lost interest. While attending a medicine show, Winifred Johnson observed the following different responses:

The audience is strangely variegated . . . some of the spectators lift their brows in evident enjoyment. Others, less naïve, view the performance with little apparent pleasure. Slummers from the north side of town chuckle audibly. ‘I wish you had a yen for burlesque . . . the show might be more enthralling.’ (397)

When Johnson implies that only the naïve might enjoy the show, she ignores the choice the audience has within the medicine show. While some audience members may have been tricked into purchase products due to their lack of intelligence, others perhaps equated the purchase of the remedy with the price of the entertainment and gladly paid the money as compensation for the good time they had. Configured as consumers, the audience, in many regards, became the chief player in the drama of the medicine show with the climax occurring when they chose to buy the product or not.

When the audiences stopped enacting their roles as consumers, the medicine show necessarily declined. Ultimately, the medicine show, a strong supporter of and platform

for the forces of modernization, met its demise, ironically enough, due to those same exact forces. As Mae Noell remarks in “Some Memories of a Medicine Show Performer,” with the advent of “the automobile, roads were graveled, then widened, then finally paved. The local people who would have been our audiences were released from their entrapment, and could travel to the cities for more sophisticated entertainment” (25). Big business also grew jealous of the forms’ perceived success and created a larger industry around medicine that eliminated the need for medicine shows through its available capital, “quantity production, distribution, service, and advertising” (LeBlanc 237). The very processes that the medicine show extolled – modernization, consumerism, and choice – not only allowed big business to prevail but also led audiences to seek new and different performance and consumer opportunities and not to wait for the next show to roll into town. Moreover, as medicine shows continued to foster consumer culture, audiences became more and more savvy customers asking more questions and viewing pitches with a more suspect eye. This process was exacerbated by a series of laws, including the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, that put strict regulations on medicine manufacturers and a series of exposés published in mass circulation magazines like *Collier’s Weekly* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* (McNamara 143, 147). These exposés aimed to educate rural readers about the dangers of patent medicine and to empower them as consumers. Such articles led consumers to seek those “real” medicines approved under the Pure Food and Drug Act as opposed to the natural cure-alls sold by the pitchmen and women. The final straw for medicine shows in Appalachia came with the stock market crash in 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression. While some larger shows were able to survive by adopting the techniques of larger corporations, most

medicine shows died because their audiences – primarily rural and poor – no longer had money to spend and lost their power as consumers. As former pitch doctor Old Doc Keister Wiglow said in a 1934 Richmond Times-Dispatch article, “hard times have made the hicks in the sticks hungrier but they’re healthier. It seems the less they have to cram into their stomachs the healthier they are” (2). Without money, the performers could not set the proper stage and the audience could not perform the role of consumer.

Yet in the heyday of the form in the beginning of the twentieth century, medicine show audiences, particularly in Appalachia, were afforded the opportunity to enact the role of consumer, a major component of efforts to modernize the region, in a variety of ways. Performance allowed Southern Appalachians the opportunity to try out this role while witnessing pitches that performed both the exotic and the local. They saw both Asian Princesses and “carrot-topped rustics” on the same stage and began to see the world outside their region through the lens of these performances. Moreover, the performance of Southern stereotypes, incorporated into the pitches and entertainments, forced these Appalachian audiences to confront these constructions. As consumers in the market driven economy of the medicine show, they had the ability to police these images. If they deemed them offensive or inaccurate, they could express their displeasure by leaving or at least refusing the pitch. If they embraced them and found them truthful they enjoyed the performance and expressed it with laughter and through a financial exchange. Both scenarios could also exist within the same audience as the consumer transaction was ultimately an individual one (albeit crowds can be persuasive). Medicine shows then fostered individualism consistent with modernization and afforded Appalachian

audiences opportunities to contribute to and comment on the modernization of their community.

In the role of consumer they also were able to construct and reconstruct their own identities as Southern and Appalachian through their active participation. In choosing to become purchaser or remain passive audience members, the individual participated in changing ideas of what it meant to be Southern and Appalachian in the face of the modernizing forces of consumerism, affirming or denying the collective Southern myth or image presented. Given the opportunity in performance to enact the role (or not) and witness the numerous pitches and performances, the Southern Appalachian audience member actively participated in events that trafficked in contested Southern identities like the hillbilly or Sambo characters, staged debates over modernization, and defined or redefined themselves along with or against the attempts of the medicine shows to characterize them.

* * *

In the summer of 2006, I visited the Appalachia History Museum located in Norris, Tennessee. It calls itself a “Living Mountain Village,” the Appalachian version of Colonial Williamsburg. As I walked the ground, through rows of small cabins and barns, I paused to take in the environment. I stood in an immense green field, dotted with haystack and wandering livestock, staring up at a rolling hill, thick with trees. In between the trees, I made out a few buildings – a school house, a mill, a church perhaps. I thought back on Medlin’s words, the ones that began this chapter. I imagined the mountaineers coming down out of them mountains. The beauty of the landscape overwhelmed me and I began to get a sense of the symbiotic relationship between Appalachia’s people and

nature. But where was the show? As I explored further, I spotted a medicine show cart behind a wire enclosure – out of public view, no plaque or description. I was told they bring the cart out once a year and perform a medicine show as part of the Tennessee Fall Homecoming. I thought of telling the proprietors of the real treasure they have so callously hidden away from all their guests. But I thought better of it. I realized that, of course, the medicine show cart must remain enclosed, encased, hidden from view. For the medicine show really lived in the Appalachian people themselves, a moving transient, ephemeral force contained within the lived experience of those former audience members.

Dolly Parton is one of those people, born and raised in Sevierville, Tennessee in the Appalachian Mountains. In her song, “Appalachian Memories,” she sings of a wayward Southern soul pulled north by the promise of fortune. She encapsulates the feelings of many Appalachians disconnected from their region by the forces of modernization. In the chorus, she sings

Oh and these northern nights are dreary
And my Southern heart is weary
I wonder how the old folks are back home
But I’ll keep leanin’ on sweet Jesus
I know He’ll love and guide and lead us
Appalachian memories keep me strong.

Parton’s lyrics paint a picture of an Appalachia steeped in tradition, with a strong religious foundation and sense of the past. Her words imply that one remains Southern even after they leave home and arrive at their eventual location. Moreover, she equates

Appalachia with the South; they become almost one and the same. Parton refuses outside assessments of her home and defines her region through her own lyrics. Just as the protagonist of her song is lured out of Appalachia by the promise of work, Parton's career has often found her far away from her home in the mountains. Yet her "Appalachian memories" stay with her and guide her through the complications of the modern world.

Chapter Three

“Nothin’ Dirty Goin’ On” or

How Atlanta Found its Identity in a *Whorehouse*

“No place in the South is more thoroughly American than Atlanta. The appearance of its streets is like Boston. In the cosmopolitan character of its population and variety of its business interests it is like New York, while in the busy activity of its people its like Chicago. It has the summer climate of Jerusalem and the winter climate of Rome, altogether giving the finest climate in which English is spoken.”

– *Atlanta in a Cotton Bale*, 1904

“Unique, brilliant Atlanta! Breaker of precedents in city building, with no mighty water courses or vast mineral treasures at her door to guarantee success; beautiful Atlanta, standing at the gateway to the New South with vatic fire in her eyes and the aureole of prophesy upon her brow and the spirit of dauntless optimism guiding on indomitable industry, and she has made a city which has defied urban adage and municipal proverb, a city which is Southern, but no longer sectional, Georgian, but national, too.”

– Dr. Carter Helm Jones, *Atlanta Georgian*, 1924

“Atlanta is the most over-grasping, boastful, insecure, adolescent city in America, bar none. It is also the most successful, remarkable, creative, envied city in the country from the point of view of economic development . . . yet Atlanta has to decide what it wants to be when it grows up.”

- John Huey, managing editor of *Forbes Magazine*, 1995

On January 9th, 1980, Joseph Litsch, theatre reviewer for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, reported that the Fox Theatre had been “converted to ‘The Best Little

Whorehouse in Texas” (Litsch 1-B). He declared that “the No. 1 sale item was fun” and that “a near capacity crowd was buying almost as fast as the cast could sell it” (Litsch 1-B). Litsch’s words cast the Atlanta audience in the role of consumer and skillfully manage to suggest multiple possibilities for the meaning of the “fun” being purchased. While some patrons may have been drawn in by the salacious marketing campaign or by the promise of a glimpse of skin, others may have bought into the “fun” of nostalgia and delighted in a requiem for an older, simpler time presented via “a fitting tribute to the death of a Texas landmark” (11-B). The multiple meanings offered for spectators by this theatrical event make it a rich location for an examination of what it meant to be a Southerner at the beginning of the 1980s. This musical, with its “honky-tonk cowboys,” “peroxide blondes,” and down-home, country demeanor provided an opportunity for those in attendance to witness the dissection and discussion of conflicting ideologies of the Old and New South and to locate their own lives (as Americans, Southerners, Atlantans, etc.) in the Southern histories presented onstage. The premiere of *Whorehouse* at Atlanta, Georgia’s Fabulous Fox Theatre not only marked the first grand, professional theatrical staging of the decade, but marked an important moment in the history of both the city and the theater itself.

This particular production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* at the newly reopened Fox Theatre and in the burgeoning metropolis of Atlanta provides an example of how popular entertainment can reflect and engage with identity formation. Competing images of Southern identity circulating within the region and the city revealed themselves on the stage of the Fox Theatre during the week long run of this show. Throughout this performance event, mythologies were conjured, stereotypes embodied, and, most

significantly, Old South and New South ideologies were discussed and debated.

Positioning these two possible Southern identities at odds with one another, the musical offered a potent, albeit metaphorical, political message about the changes both social and political in the South since the Civil War and their affects on Southern institutions and populations.

To understand the importance of this production of *Whorehouse* in Atlanta at the beginning of the 1980s and the various conversations the show sparked and contributed to around issues of Southern identity and representation, one must understand the rich histories and stories at play in the city in and around that time period. Moreover, to comprehend how the musical provided a location for a debate between an Old and New South identity, one must recognize the trajectories of identificatory practices that have influenced the city leading up to the arrival of the show. With these histories in mind, an examination of the theatrical venue and musical theatre form will provide material to begin to piece together the myriad possible meanings this production might have had regarding Southern identity for these Atlanta audiences.

The history of Atlanta is a richly varied one full of births and rebirths, rises and falls. Since its antebellum days, writers and scholars have often resorted to metaphor to describe the city. Following the Civil War, Atlanta became associated with the image of the phoenix, the mythical bird that rises from the ashes. Having been literally burned to the ground at the hands of the Union Army under the command of the flame-haired William Tecumseh Sherman, Atlanta was reborn and rebuilt following the war and often stood in as a beacon of hope and possibility for the defeated South. Hence, it is no

surprise that Atlanta became synonymous with the New South movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The term New South presents many difficulties for historians, as C. Vann Woodward states in his *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* (1951), for the term does not denote “a place name, as in ‘New England’ nor does it precisely designate a period, as does ‘Confederacy’” (ix). Rather, the term, at least for Woodward, harkens back to a sort of rallying cry akin to the use of Dixie or The Lost Cause replete with a “hopeful nationalism” (ix). Noting such associations and avoiding the potential clichés embodied by the term, Woodward posits New South as a phrase combining the South – “the eleven former Confederate states plus Kentucky and, after it became a state, Oklahoma” – with the New, here defined by those qualities of the region that differed from the antebellum period. Woodward helpfully locates the “New” as process rather than a static classification. The New South became “a more distinctive region than it had earlier”: more politically unified and economically unique in terms of its distinctive per capita wealth, income, and living conditions (x). New peculiarities supplanted old ones. Like Appalachia, the project of defining this New South tended to be a metaphorical one where the region is something known but not known. Atlanta, as the economic and political heart of the region, became the center of most of these processes which remained closely tied to modernization and ultimately the unofficial capital of the New South.

Similar to political and business leader’s use of the phrase New South as a slogan for the post Civil War South, those government and economic officials invested in the development and promotion of Atlanta relied on similar techniques. In addition to

exploiting the image of the phoenix, those invested in the marketing and development of the city sought means to sell the new modernizing landscape to the rest of the nation. George Tindall, in his *The Emergence of the New South*, refers to this as “The Atlanta Spirit” – a kind of pervasive “growth psychology” that allowed the city to experience economic growth despite numerous hardships including the Great Depression and racial unrest (Grantham 165). According to Tindall, Atlanta, as “the metropolitan center” of the South and source of “the new middle-class spirit,” set the pace for and was often the face of the rest of the region (99). He quotes a Greensboro, North Carolina writer who in 1924 noted, “in hundreds of towns ‘from the Potomac to Mobile Bay, from Hatteras to the Rio Grande . . . there is no God but advertising, and Atlanta is his prophet” (99). The success of the city, prophesized by writers and politicians of the times and assured by the abundant railway lines flowing in and out, appeared intrinsically tied to the success of a New, post Civil War South.

Yet “The Atlanta Spirit” contained within it many paradoxes. While the city in the early twentieth century supported numerous colleges and a symphony orchestra, hosted annual performances by the Metropolitan Opera Company, fostered the rise of Coca-Cola, generated the railway infrastructure for the entire Southeast, and provided the crucible for the Civil Rights Movement, it also was the source of the creation of the Ku Klux Klan and the site of a major race riot in 1906 (99).

The theatre often provided the location within the city for the expression of these contradictions and for individuals to profess and perform their own Southern and Atlantan identities. The Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, for example, in part, erupted due to series of performances of a theatrical adaptation of Thomas Dixon’s novel *The*

Clansman. Dixon's novel was later turned into the infamous 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*. *The Clansman* follows the plight of a white family in the Restoration South as they struggle to deal with their changing world of freedmen and carpetbaggers and dramatizes the origins for the Ku Klux Klan. For Atlanta audiences, the scene in which a young, white, thirteen year-old Flora attempting to flee from the lecherous Black freeman Gus chooses to leap off a cliff to her death rather than surrender her virtue particularly compelled the audience to response. David Fork Godshalk, in *Veiled Vision: The 1906 Race Riot and The Reshaping of American Race Relations*, (2005) remarks that most white Atlanta audience members often "screamed 'Lynch him' after the Ku Klux Klan captured Gus" and "cheered at his ritual murder" while Black audience members "protested with loud hisses" (36). Prominent Atlantans weighed in on the production as well. Rev. Len Broughton condemned the play as an affront to "Southern manhood and womanhood" and chastised playwright Dixon for creating a work that threatened to "stir up such passions of hell" that would dissuade "an impending amalgamation of the whites and blacks" (qtd in Goodson 42). Suffragist and author Rebecca Latimer expressed her opinion to the *Atlanta Constitution* that the play would only "feed a terrible flame into a consuming conflagration simply to advertise a book and draw money from the pockets of men, women, and children" (qtd. in Goodson 42). Both Broughton and Latimer included in their remarks on *The Clansman* a sharp condemnation of theatre and its distinctive ability to rile of audiences into action.

The disparate opinions of the actions onstage voiced and enacted both in the audience and throughout the city led to police intervention and young black men were arrested and racial tensions were stirred. These tensions spilled over into the streets and

when combined with erroneous, widespread media reports of black men attacking white women led to a four day riot where white mobs killed at least twenty-five black men and, in turn, black residents defended their neighborhoods from violent attacks. As Godshalk concludes at the end of his book, “The riot’s ultimate lesson, then, is not that history is the product of dramatic individual events but, rather, that history results from the accumulation of an infinite number of interconnected local and national decisions made by a welter of individuals and groups” (290). In this moment, as it would be time and time again throughout the twentieth century, the theatre in Atlanta became the site of many of these “local” decisions that had broad implications for the citizens of the city and the nation. Furthermore, and rather ironically, just as *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* would do again in January of 1980, the riot reminded many of the potential dangers of an overzealous media and the potential dangers present in the age of modernization and mass communication.

The marketing of the city of Atlanta as a burgeoning metropolis and gateway to the South’s modern age continued despite setbacks such as the racial tensions and inequalities highlighted by the 1906 riot. By the 1950s, “The Spirit of Atlanta” had become so ingrained in the day to day life of the citizens of Atlanta that politicians incorporated it into their political platforms. Then Senator Ivan Allen Jr. circulated a booklet entitled *The Atlanta Spirit: Altitude + Attitude* (1948) in which he described Atlanta as “so healthful that it has never been found necessary to quarantine it against any disease epidemic” (qtd. in Pomerantz 210). He went on to state that Atlanta was “The City of Pep”: “a city where the men walk fast and work fast and where the women have natural and beautiful complexions” and one where even the mill villages “are different –

well-kept, painted, and in good repair” (210). In *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, historian Gary M. Pomerantz uses such publications to illustrate Allen’s commitment to civic boosterism and his abilities to use Atlanta’s aspirations for his own political gain. Allen eventually became mayor of Atlanta in 1962 based largely on his decision to support school integration – a choice that Pomerantz believes was chiefly due to the potential damage refusal might do to the economic future of the city. His political speeches, chiefly aimed at defaming his principal rival and outspoken integration opponent, Lester Maddox, again focused on a concern for the future. Yet, as Pomerantz recalls, it is most telling that one of Allen’s first official visits as mayor was to the home of Coca Cola CEO Bob Woodruff who infamously remarked to Allen at the time, “Anytime you want, you have a bed here” (302). Woodruff’s close relationship with the ambitious Allen illustrates the complex relationship between politics, commerce, and race that characterized the history of Atlanta in the mid-twentieth century.

Cultivating “The Spirit of Atlanta” in the nineteen fifties and sixties often meant walking a dangerous line between promoting civic boosterism and fostering racial equality. Allen and his mayoral predecessor William Hartsfield laid the groundwork for the city’s approach to navigating the potentially hazardous terrains of race and commerce by cultivating and even manufacturing a sense of racial harmony to promote business interests. Hartsfield’s infamous 1955 statement responding to the desegregation of the city’s public golf courses that proclaimed Atlanta “a city too busy to hate” set a tone similar to “The Atlanta Spirit” of the early twentieth century. The phrase attained popularity in political and advertising campaigns despite the fact that it failed to even

approach the truth. In a 1985 interview, Allen reflected on his and Hartsfield's decision to propagate this powerful myth:

I could promise all I wanted to about Atlanta's bright, booming economic future, but none of it would come about if Atlanta failed to cope with the racial issue . . . was Atlanta going to be another Little Rock, or was Atlanta going to set the pace for the New South? (qtd. in Bayor 37)

Allen's comments show the enduring power of crafting mythology to try and secure public sentiment and assure economic and political gain. While Atlanta certainly did not see racial violence like that of the 1906 race riot during desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement, more insidious racial tensions smoldered throughout the city particularly around the issues of employment, poverty, and transportation. These issues threatened to topple Atlanta's image as the leader of the New South. As the city approached the 1970s, its "false sense of racial progressivism" could be more clearly seen.

In the decade leading up to the premiere of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* in 1980 at the Fabulous Fox Theatre on the corner of Peachtree Street and Ponce de Leon Avenue in the heart of downtown Atlanta, the relationship between politics, race, and the economy entered a new phase. "The Atlanta Spirit" was replaced by "Forward Atlanta," a campaign to sell Atlanta as the next international city, a "horizontal city that combines the amenities of suburban environments with the efficiencies of compact industrial centers, commercial areas and other places of concentrated employment and activity" (White & Crimmins 40). Along with this new international focus, came a rapid movement toward suburbanization; the term "Metro area," linking the city proper to the

numerous counties and suburban areas surrounding it, was increasingly used. During the 1970s, the population of the central city area of Atlanta shrank by 70,000 people as many residents left to inhabit the suburban surrounding areas. The phenomenon known as “white flight” continued into the early eighties as another 31,000 individuals moved elsewhere (Hartshorn & Ihlanfeldt 22). Conversely, the African American population increased from 186,820 (1960) to 255,051 (1970) to 283,158 (1980) and the percentage of African Americans in terms of the entire population of Atlanta increased from 38.3 (1960) to 51.3 (1970) to 66.6 (1980) (Bayor 7).

Along with these major demographic changes, political shifts occurred as well. Maynard Jackson, grandson of famed orator and activist John Wesley Dobbs, became Atlanta’s first Black mayor in 1973, ushering in a new era of consecutive African American mayors that continues to this day. Jackson, a lawyer by trade, had participated in the Civil Rights movement and his presence in the mayoral office promised to enact some change within the city. Yet, as Ronald Bayor remarks in *Atlanta: The Historical Paradox*, the many years of white political control often stifled the ability of Black politicians as “the city’s race and class problems had been many decades in the making and were difficult to resolve” (43). To get anything accomplished, Mayor Jackson and his predecessor Andrew Young had to continue to walk the fine line between race, politics, and economics and finesse and woo Atlanta’s white business elite. In *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, anthropologist Charles Rutheiser quotes political scientist Clarence Stone who declared that this period in Atlanta politics marked the birth of a “biracial ‘urban regime’ . . . that united Atlanta’s largely white corporate elite with its newly empowered African-American political

establishment in a bond of mutually pecuniary advantage” (179). Rutheiser reminds that this union was never wholly peaceful and in fact was “a mixed and often quite contentious public-private partnership of white money and black power” (179). Furthermore the divide between Atlanta, the city, and Georgia the state often hurt the new mayor’s efforts at encouraging business. For example, the American Psychological Association relocated its 1979 convention from Atlanta to New York, citing Georgia’s failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment as its chief rationale. As Atlanta approached the beginning of the 1980s, the new regime, led by Jackson, struggled to reconcile the mistakes of the past and its relationship with the larger state while simultaneously continuing to guide Atlanta on its seemingly destined path toward national and international admiration.

In addition to “Forward Atlanta” and other campaigns to promote Atlanta’s potential as an economic and commercial entity, the city played an active role in developing the concept of what came to be called the Sunbelt South, in essence a repackaged, more expansive (ideologically and geographically) New South. A young, conservative political analyst for Richard Nixon, named Kevin Phillips, coined the term in the early 1970s to identify the booming economic region of the country stretching from Virginia and Florida to Southern California. The move signaled what James C. Cobb, in *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990*, (1993) calls “the maturation of a growing tendency to view the United States from a regional rather than a national perspective” (186). The idea of the Sunbelt, as Dewey Grantham noted in *The South in Modern America* (1994), positioned the South as “abandoning its ‘geographic, mental, and social’ isolation and being fully integrated in

into the larger American system” and placed Atlanta alongside other prominent cities in the South and Southwest while fostering a rethinking of the region as a whole (259). Numan V. Bartley, in *The Creation of Modern Georgia*, illustrates the important difference between the earlier “‘Southern way of life,’ the phrase so ardently defended by Southern segregationists and so laden with overtones of racism and provincialism” and the “Southern style of life” a much “ballyhooed” phrase associated with the Sunbelt South circulated by “Southern industrial promoters” and “pregnant with promises of year-round golf games and barbeque cookouts” (232). National events such as Watergate and Vietnam had disillusioned many Americans and let the nation taste “the humiliation of defeat, a burden with which the South has been familiar for over a hundred years” (Cobb 183). The Sunbelt South provided an alternative brimming with “confident purposefulness” and possibility, a sharp contrast to the disenchanting North (184). Along with an emphasis on leisure evidenced by statements like this one in a 1976 *Time* magazine article, “life seems to move more slowly . . . because Southerners take more time to enjoy it,” the Sunbelt fostered increased industrialization (qtd. in Cobb 185). The region also benefited from the federal government’s growing investment in the military complex and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as witnessed through the building of bases and centers and the distribution of military contracts to Sunbelt companies. The ability of the Sunbelt to attract people, factories, capital, and the federal government’s attention away from the old industrial centers of the North seemed to signal a potentially profound shift in American politics, one that led Larry L. King, the book writer of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, to declare at the 1976 Democratic convention “We Ain’t White Trash No More!” (qtd. in Cobb *We Ain’t* 135). And much

to the benefit of Atlanta's reputation as a national and international city, in 1976, Jimmy Carter, a native of Plains, Georgia and Governor of the state, became the first President from Georgia and a shining beacon of the successes possible in the Sunbelt South.

In many ways, Jimmy Carter became the embodiment of Sunbelt ideology and as such spread new understandings of Southernness throughout the country and world. He was unquestionably Southern, as he reminded on numerous occasions, "my family's lived in Georgia over two hundred years . . . those who understand the South would understand a major portion of me" (qtd. in Bartley, *Jimmy Carter* 2). Yet he also understood the importance of appealing beyond the region as attested by the opening of his autobiography *Why Not the Best?: "I am a Southerner and an American"* (2). His ability to inhabit multiple identities led one writer to refer to him as "the Yankee from Georgia" emphasizing his capability to reunite the nation (Cobb 184). Above all, Carter prided himself on his common-man, anti-establishment image and crafted a platform steeped in the traditions of populism and progressivism. Just as he had endeavored to modernize Georgia while governor, he continued to support efforts to re-brand the South as a place of progressive potential and economic prosperity. Carter was able to use his position as political outsider to promote changes within the government bureaucracy and refine and reshape the face of the Democratic Party.

Yet what could have been a promising moment for the city of Atlanta to achieve a direct, sympathetic ear within the White House and achieve national prominence never materialized due to the relationship between Carter and Mayor Maynard Jackson. Pomerantz, in *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, quotes a "high-ranking Carter administration official" as saying that "in holding back his endorsement, Maynard Jr.

‘wanted a contract. Maynard’s a dealmaker. He’s very political’” (461). Years later, Carter, who refused to deal with Jackson, was quoted as saying “Maynard obviously has an ego” (qtd in Pomerantz 461). While Carter did take many prominent Atlantans to Washington with him, including future Atlanta mayor Andrew Young who he appointed a United Nations Ambassador, he granted the city no particular attention while in office and Jackson, “among big-city mayors, did not enjoy a preferred status at the White House during the next four years” (461-2). To do so might have tarnished Carter’s common-man image more aligned with his native Plains, Georgia than the big city of Atlanta and its racial and financial politics.

But Carter’s fondness for his state and home town did benefit the city if not directly. Throughout his time in office and while Governor of Georgia, President Carter understood the importance of the arts to the cultural development of the nation and state. In his 1977 book, *Carter on the Arts*, he not only strongly declared his support for the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) but also took time to detail his own personal experiences:

I am vividly aware of the importance of the arts in our communities. I still remember the impact a visiting symphony orchestra made in the county I came from in south Georgia. It was the first time a symphony orchestra had ever played in that area. Everybody, from country merchants to farmers went, listened and enjoyed. The orchestra's visit was the main topic of conversation for weeks afterwards. People felt that something beautiful had touched their lives. (qtd. in Lynch 29)

Carter's support of the arts on a federal level afforded many Atlanta arts leaders the opportunity and language to begin to argue for more financial resources from their local and state governments. The Sunbelt rhetoric of improvement and prosperity provided useful language for arguing for the inclusion of the arts alongside other crucial policy issues.

Associated with Atlanta's desire to improve its reputation nationally and internationally was an emphasis on the development of a strong cultural community. The city struggled to strike a balance between its economic desires and its rich, cultural heritage. This struggle leads some, like Steve Goodson, in *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta: 1880-1930* (2002), to conclude that "in its prolonged and frenzied scramble to become a modern, respected, 'international city,' Atlanta has sacrificed the better part of its soul" (190). In a 1977 study, published by the College of Business Administration at Georgia State University, Michael Lomax, then director of the Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs, countered such arguments by arguing that "it is a fact that art of every kind tends to flourish best in an urban environment" (22). For Lomax, appointed to the position by Mayor Maynard Jackson who also established the Bureau, government intervention was necessary to assure the future of the arts in Atlanta. By keeping artists from leaving the city through financial and "moral" support, the Bureau aimed "not simply to create a cosmopolitan cultural atmosphere in Atlanta, but also to give Atlanta a voice which speaks to the whole world" (25). The arts became a critical tool in the marketing of Atlanta as an international city and in the building of its reputation.

The history of the arts in 1960's and 70's Atlanta leading up to the 1980 production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* is one of tragedy and rebirth similar to the story of the city itself. On Sunday morning, June 3rd, 1962 a chartered Air France Boeing 707 headed for Atlanta, Georgia crashed on take-off from Orly Airport in Paris, France killing 130 people on board. Of the victims, 122 were Atlantans, members of the Atlanta Art Association, a group of community leaders, patrons and artists dedicated to the preservation and expansion of the arts in Atlanta. The members were returning to Atlanta after a 25-day guided tour of Old World art treasures. Up till that point in aviation history, it was the worst ever recorded air disaster involving a single aircraft. Susan Lowance, a member of the traveling group who fortuitously had decided to stay on in Europe for further travel and study, characterized the excursion as an important moment in Atlanta cultural history: "It was to mark Atlanta's becoming an international airport – an international city. And there was much excitement. It was *the* trip to go on in the eyes of many people" (GPTV 1).

Those aboard the plane spanned the ranks of Atlanta's elite citizenry from Delbert Paige, a partner in the national accounting firm Ernst & Ernst, to Raiford Ragsdale, the "strong-willed daughter of a political family who was the first woman on the Atlanta Board of Education, a stalwart in the Democratic Party, and a Woman of the Year in Fine Arts and a strong supporter of the High Museum of Art" (Abrams 25-6). Roughly two-thirds of those registered for the trip were women, "ranging in age from the early twenties to the upper seventies . . . and most were typical middle-class housewives" (77). In addition to wealthy patrons, the trip also had attracted a number of local artists and actors including Mary Louise Bealer Humphries, Julia Jones, Dolly Brooks, Louise Turner, and

Helen Cartledge, an “amateur actress” and principal founder of Theatre Atlanta (104-6). With the crash of flight 707, Atlanta lost many prominent members of its arts community, but through the processes of constructing the proper memorial for these lost citizens, the city gained a thriving cultural venue, The Woodruff Arts Center.

The Woodruff Arts Center brought together the symphony, art museum, and theatre into one location and eventually became the home of Atlanta’s primary regional theatre, the Alliance Theatre. As one newspaper reporter phrased it, “the Alliance is to Atlanta theatre what Macy’s is to retail” (Schwartz, *Small Groups* 8-A). However, in the decade preceding the crash in Orly, the Atlanta theatre scene consisted primarily of two different organizations. In 1957, three community theatres – the Atlanta Civic Theatre, the Atlanta Theatre Guild, and a group called The Playmakers – joined to form Theatre Atlanta. Theatre Atlanta came together out of a desire to alleviate financial burdens and operating costs. Unable to function individually, these groups sacrificed some of their community or volunteer roots (and thus their artistic independence) to form a business conglomerate with its own board of directors. Community leader George Goodwin, vice-president of First National Bank, encouraged the union and insisted on becoming its first board member. Goodwin became one of the primary voices and chief proponents for theatre in Atlanta. He saw theatre as key to attracting new business to the city. The other group – the Atlanta Municipal Theatre (AMT) – operated under a similar model. Managing director Christopher Manos, a native of Ohio, likewise sought to run his organization like a business. An experienced producer with his own New York production agency, Manos desired to bring professionalism to the Atlanta theatre. He conceived of theatre on a grand scale producing “a summer series of musicals called

Theatre Under the Stars at Chastain Park, an amphitheatre owned by the City of Atlanta” alongside “Grand Opera at the Park” (Clark 45). Whereas Theatre Atlanta remained tenuously tied to its communal roots, Atlanta Municipal Theatre relished in its slick professionalism and monetary successes. The differences between Theatre Atlanta and the Atlanta Municipal theatre highlighted the larger struggles within the city over the issue of support for the arts that would continue throughout the 1960s and 1970s into the present.

The very week that *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* opened at the Fox Theatre in January of 1980, *The Atlanta Constitution* ran, on the front page no less, the third and fourth installments in its in-depth analysis of the financing of the arts in the city. The third part, published on January 7th, presented an emerging battle for funding that pitted the well established, well supported Atlanta Arts Alliance against the possibly forming alternative arts coalition housed in the old Erlanger theatre. The chief issue of the battle was access to money. The Atlanta Arts Alliance, comprised of The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Alliance Theatre/Atlanta Children’s Theatre, the High Museum of Art, and the Atlanta College of Art, only brought together four of the city’s arts organizations yet managed an annual budget of \$8 million, well above any other group in the city. The potential alternative arts coalition, made up of the Academy Theatre, the Atlanta Ballet, and the Atlanta Civic Opera, complained that because of the Arts Alliance’s name recognition and corporate structure, the other arts groups “get the leftovers, and sometimes not even that, when it comes to fundraising” (Schwartz, *Big-Four* 6-A). Kent Stephens, director of the Imaginary Theatre and proponent of the new coalition, remarked that “the South tends to be very conscious of institutions. People

give money to the institutionalized or ‘museum’ arts” (6-A). The debate frames the struggle over arts funding as a battle between the corporate and coalitional, a definitive New South quandary. While the competing organization never materialized, the issues raised forced Atlanta to consider the importance of the arts to its community both as economic incentive and cultural enrichment.

The Fox Theatre at the beginning of the 1980s had a tricky relationship to this discourse on arts funding. As a rental house, the Fox had no resident company creating new work and as such would perhaps appear somewhat removed from the conversation. Yet many of the groups that rented the facility – including the Atlanta Ballet and Opera, both profiled in the series – depended upon private and public funds to pay their rental fees. The fourth installment of *The Atlanta Constitution* arts funding series focused specifically on small arts groups struggling to stay afloat amongst the larger entities like the Arts Alliance and even the ballet and opera. The chief issue presented was one of venue – the lack of suitable venues in the city and the difficulty in procuring enough funds to maintain those already in use. In many ways, the newly reopened Fox sat in stark contrast to these smaller arts organizations as the big commercial road house with little in common with the various scrappy groups small on budget but big on artistic ambition. Yet, within the Fox theatre itself, both these forces, the commercial and the artistic, foregrounded in this series of articles existed side by side.

As a rental house, the Fox often became an incisive indicator of the cultural moment of the city. Traveling shows, concerts, gospel plays, high school graduations, and weddings all occur within its walls and the local and national collide in its house and on its stage on a nightly basis. In many ways the history of the Fox Theatre is a

microcosm of the city itself replete with corporate ambitions, nostalgic notions, and the birth and rebirth so closely associated with lingering notions of “The Atlanta Spirit.” The Fox, in turn, though perhaps unintentionally, provided an ideal venue for *Whorehouse*, a musical which grapples with the implications of increasing modernization on long established traditions and beliefs. Throughout its history, the Fox has struggled with both the pressures to modernize and many stresses to preserve and restore the past and yet it has maintained a reputation as a beloved city landmark and icon. A look at the story of this theatre will help illustrate how the performance of *Whorehouse* in Atlanta in January of 1980 in this specific location provided an opportunity for the audience to experience debates over what it means to be Southern in the twentieth century.

This Fabulous Fox did not begin its life as a theatrical venue. In fact, the building was initially intended to be the new Yaarab Mosque, the official meeting place of the Shriner’s fraternal order. The Yaarab temple had been founded in Atlanta in 1889 and by 1911, the Shriners had outgrown their meeting hall on the northwest corner of Peachtree and Cain Streets (now International Boulevard). In 1919, with a membership of over 4,000 including many prominent and wealthy business and government leaders, the order purchased a tract of land at the corner of Peachtree Street and Ponce de Leon Avenue for \$225,000. Discussions began as to how best use the space. Member Henry Heinz, son-in-law of the founder of Coca Cola, proposed a facility that included public space for events, plays, and concerts. Rental income from these spaces, he thought, would help to offset the costs of construction and operating expenses upon the building’s completion. Once the group agreed to Heinz’s proposal they began a massive fundraising campaign to construct their new facility. Interest in the project led them to reach their fundraising

goals in less than a month, in part due to such glowing press as the Chamber of Commerce's *City Builder* which declared "that 'no Shrine mosque anywhere in America will have finer accommodations for its members than the one Yaarab Temple is going to build'" (Roberts 6-7).

With funds in hand, the temple then held a design contest to determine the overall look of the building, turning to public for input. Local architectural firm, Marye, Alger, and Vinour submitted the winning concept by tapping into the Shriner's Middle Eastern influences and proposing a grandiose, opulent variation on a mosque. It is said that the Shriner's chief potentate, or leader, remarked that the proposed structure would "out-Baghdad Baghdad" (qtd. in Roberts 8). The resulting building drew from many different influences including Onion domes, Moorish villages, Spanish architecture, King Tut's Tomb, and Minarets (the tower from which Islamic faithful are called to prayer). Remarkably, the outcome remained lavish and tasteful and refrained from garishness and overkill. The finished structure, over budget by nearly \$1.5 million, literally brought the international to Atlanta, placing an amalgamation of Middle Eastern styles smack in the middle of downtown Atlanta (Roberts 8).

Fortuitously for the financially fledgling project, William Fox, famed developer of movie palaces in the early twentieth century, got wind of the Shriner's elaborate development and approached them about leasing the theatre auditorium. Fox negotiated a twenty one year lease of the space that still allowed the Shriner's use of all the office space and the theatre proper six times a year for their own use creating only the third movie palace in the United States. The arrangement failed to resolve the fiscal woes however and some designs were modified and the issued \$1.5 million in bonds. To add

insult to injury, all the money troubles were only exacerbated by the crash of the stock market in 1929. Yet somehow the Shriners persisted and on December 25th, 1929, the Fabulous Fox Theatre, a 250,000 square-foot, 5,000 seat venue, opened for business.

For the next decade the theatre would change hands a number of times as the Great Depression caused many of the Yaarab Temple members to default on their pledges. By 1932, William Fox was bankrupt and the theatre was forced to close after only 125 weeks of operation, a victim of tough financial times. The theatre changed hands a number of times over the next few years. With the mortgage foreclosed in December of 1932, a public auction was held and the theatre was sold for \$75,000 to the Theatrical Holding Company which later dissolved and the building was then taken over by the city of Atlanta for failure to pay taxes. The city eventually leased the building to Robert B. Wilby in 1933, who served more as a guardian than owner and, in turn, he relinquished it to the partnership of Arthur Lucas, William Jenkins, and Paramount Public Theatres also known as Mosque Inc. Mosque Inc. got the Fox on sound financial footing and eliminated the last remaining presence of the Shriners by leasing their office space to the Georgia Theatre Services Corporation (15).

After a few decades of success, highlighted by the yearly, sold-out tour of New York's Metropolitan Opera, the screening of films like *The Robe*, *Giant*, *Gypsy*, *The Guns of Navarone*, and the premiere of Disney's 1946 *Song of the South* presented on one of the country's first 35-mm Cinemascope projectors and a panoramic screen, and the restoration of the Mighty Moe, the Fox's famed Moller Organ, the Fox struggled to acclimate to the changing landscape of popular entertainment. The age of the spectacular movie palaces was passing as television continued to gain popularity. Shifts

in Atlanta's population, with many residents moving out of the city to the suburbs, depleted audiences. Yet what ultimately caused the downfall of the Fox in this period was new requirements from the motion picture distribution companies that required long runs, sometimes upwards of one or two months, in order to secure the rights to screen first run films. The large seating capacity at the Fox made it nearly impossible for the theatre to make a profit under such requirements. While the theatre tried to find alternatives like showing family films or low-budget films like Vincent Price's 3-D *House of Wax*, the theatre simply failed to make a profit. Despite great financial successes with rock concerts, their limited engagements did not yield the capital necessary to keep the large theatre running. As a result, Mosque Inc. began talks with Southern Bell, the large Atlanta-based communication company, to purchase the property for the construction of a parking lot for their new corporate headquarters (16-18).

On January 2, 1975, the Fox Theatre closed its doors, an event that seemed to signal a victory for "the relentless growth of metropolitan Atlanta" – modernization, progress, and economics over sentimentality and leisure (Fox Theatre 2). The following day, *The Atlanta Constitution* ran an article by Fay S. Joyce pronouncing that "The Fox Theatre is Dead!," citing "fear of crime and competition from more convenient suburban theatres" as the chief reasons (2-A). Trustee Fred Storey was quoted as saying "those old theatre monuments with so many seats simply can't operate in today's world" (qtd. in Joyce 2-A). Ironically, the last film that played on the big screen was *The Klansman*, a film Fox manager Mike Spirtos called "the year's worst film" (qtd. in Joyce 2-A). The film told of a battle between the races in the rural Alabama town of Atoka involving the Ku Klux Klan and starring Lee Marvin, Richard Burton, Linda Evans, and O.J. Simpson.

Yet unlike the fury caused by the performances of *The Clansman* in the early twentieth century, the screening barely attracted an audience, mostly just people who sought to get one last look at the Atlanta icon before its demolition. The time of the movie palace had passed and the Fox Theatre struggled to find its place within the changing dynamics of the city. To save itself from the wrecking ball, it would have to reassert its position in the city and somehow find a way to fit within the modern city landscape.

Just as Southern Bell began making plans to tear down the theatre, the Fox was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. While this honor is normally reserved for structures much older, the Fox received the honor based upon its “Outstanding architectural merit” (Fox Theatre 6). This distinction marked the theatres dual nature as both a nostalgic, artistic space but also a paragon of the modern age with state of the art technology. Yet this honor would only prevent it from being demolished by federal funds, and Southern Bell moved forward, albeit more quietly, with their plans. However, word eventually got out and a new, grassroots committee, Atlanta Landmarks was formed with the sole purpose of saving the Fox.

Atlanta Landmarks simultaneously appealed to the business sector and to popular sentiment while attracting architects, preservationists, lawyers, financiers, and politicians as its members. Together they launched a campaign of instant nostalgia to garner support and to challenge other movements to promulgate a modern idea of the city. A building not yet fifty years old was recast as a genuine Atlanta landmark the city could not live without. Perhaps due to the lack of other historic landmarks in the city, the public responded in kind. As Roberts states in the official history of the Fox,

here was where the deprivation of the Great Depression and World War II was banished for a few short hours, where first kisses were stolen, prom queens crowned, crowds swooned to Elvis Presley's audacious gyrations and fell off their chairs in laughter at Jack Benny's and Bob Hope's cornball jokes (34)

Atlanta Landmarks successfully convinced the Atlanta public that the Fox was part of their collective history, an indelible part of the city that could not fall victim to the overzealous push for development. Individuals began writing "Save the Fox" on their phone bills and contributing whatever money they could to the cause. Mayor Maynard Jackson issued a six month moratorium on the demolition of the building that allowed Atlanta Landmarks the time to raise the necessary funds. It appeared as if the city, at all levels of its citizenry, united around this theatre to save it from destruction. Ultimately, Southern Bell and Atlanta Landmarks reached an agreement, in part because the company wanted to avoid a bad public image. Under the terms of the deal, Atlanta Landmarks purchased the land surrounding the Fox for \$1.8 million while Southern Bell purchased the Fox Theatre from Mosque Inc.. The two groups then switched the land. As Roberts states, "Atlanta Landmarks had essentially purchased the Fox for \$9 a square foot; its estimated replacement value then was \$50 a square foot" (35). Thus the deal appeared to signal a victory for nostalgia and popular will over the thrust of modernization.

The Fox Theatre reopened on October 1975 only nine months after its doors were barred with a concert by Linda Ronstadt. Yet it still had to bend to economic forces and pay its \$1.8 million dollar mortgage, closing costs, interest, and renovation fund within

three years. Atlanta Landmarks again appealed to the public for support. While fundraising efforts remained slow initially, 1977 saw two major gifts, one of \$400,000 by Ben Massell Jr., the son of a local real estate magnate, and one of \$300,000 by the National Endowment of the Arts. These were both challenge grants that required matching funds. These gifts re-ignited the fundraising campaign and, with the public support of the state legislature, local businesses Coca Cola and Cox Communications, and the largest black-owned real estate company, Atlanta Landmarks paid off its mortgage four months early. With debts paid off, the Fox Theatre could again go about the business of providing a venue for a variety of artistic expressions. From that point on, the theatre would remain busy nearly 365 days a year due, in part, to good management, but also due to the theatre's solidified place within the city.

When *The Best Little Whorehouse* arrived at the Fox Theatre in January of 1980, the theatre was just beginning to build its reputation as one of the premiere theatrical venues for traveling musical theatre in the country. The previous year, in 1979, *A Chorus Line* had broken national records by grossing more than \$1 million during its three-week run. Expectations were high for a successful run.

The form of musical theatre itself in the 1970s was in a time of transition. Though the Fox Theatre would come to depend upon the success and continued popularity of musicals to attract audiences and remain financially viable, the type of musical theatre that had generated great revenue and sustained popularity throughout the previous decades virtually ceased to exist in the late 1970s. Musicals like *Chorus Line* and *Whorehouse* sought to revitalize the form and attract new audiences.

Having enjoyed nearly two full decades of financial success, the American musical entered the 1960s at the height of its popularity. What musical theatre historians refer to as the Golden Age of the American musical theatre began roughly in the mid 1940s and lasted until about 1965. The narrative of the musical's rise and fall varies slightly among musical theatre historians, but, generally, the trajectory remains nearly the same. Most position *Show Boat* (1927) as the first truly great integrated musical. The Golden Age began when Rodgers and Hammerstein adopted and built upon the traditions begun by *Show Boat* and created the ideal integrated musical. An integrated musical refers to a musical in which songs and dances "propel the plot, set a specific mood, reflect a situation, and depict a moment in a character's development" (Kislan 140-141). Kislan, and other historians like Gerald Mast, Raymond Knapp, and Mark Grant, emphasize Rodgers and Hammerstein's desire to "elevate the popular musical stage from entertainment to art" (Kislan 139). Through *Oklahoma* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *The Sound of Music* (1959), Rodgers and Hammerstein established the heights or standards to which all subsequent musical theatre will struggle to achieve and the financial successes all will strive to equal. Their ability to weave song and dance into plot, to allow song to express character's emotions and to bring a weight and seriousness to the musical stage set the standard for American musical theatre. Other predominant figures of the time, such as Lerner and Loewe (*My Fair Lady*, 1956) and Comden and Green (*On The Town*, 1944), followed in similar veins, creating musicals that appealed to a wide audience, generated the popular music of the day, and returned great profits through performance and record sales.

By the mid 1960s and 1970s, Stephen Sondheim emerged as the heir apparent to the legacy of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Even though Sondheim played with the form, favored concept over integration, and created, according to David Lewis's *Broadway Musicals: A Hundred Year History* "works of abstract texture and fringe appeal," he remained dedicated to continuing the process of integration and to the transformation of the musical to high art (108). Kander and Ebb (*Cabaret*, 1967) created work that similar to Sondheim pushed boundaries through tackling difficult, political subject matters while ultimately still contributing to the development of the integrated musical as the dominant form. But the audience was changing and musical theatre struggled to keep up.

As the 1970s progressed, the musical lost touch with the mainstream of popular culture. Though Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice created successful concept albums that became profitable shows starting with *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), and *Evita* (1979), they met with much critical disdain due to the fact that their music was seen to stand on its own outside of the show. As Stacy Wolf states in *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (2002), the "close connection between popular music and the music of the mid-twentieth century Broadway theater faded" as a result of the popularity of rock 'n' roll while "audiences got older, and the music of Broadway took on a sheen of nostalgia" (236). As demonstrated in a popular television add for the city of New York in the early 1980s, the musical "came to represent New York tourism and family fare" (236).

As Wolf's work illustrates, changes in popular tastes and music over the course of the next decade and the death of Oscar Hammerstein led many to begin to question the

place of musical theatre in the United States. According to some musical theatre scholars, the 1970s ultimately marked the beginnings of the death of the form. *New York Times* critic Walter Kerr in a 1975 article summarized that recent downward trend:

Musicals

are turning into concerts with virtually no spoken words at all and little in the way of intelligible lyrics, getting down on their knees and begging choreographers to come in and play tricks with scenery and lighting that may somehow or other save their souls . . . if we're ever going to find fresh impulse for musical comedy we're going to have to pay some attention to what happens when people open their mouths. (qtd. in *Better Foot* 314-15)

Yet even perpetually cranky musical theatre historian Ethan Mordden, in *Better Foot Forward: The History of the American Musical* (1976), questioned his own conclusions that the 1970s may signal the end of the form. He remarks that “on second thought, perhaps this isn't the fall any more. We may very well be on the cusp of something” (333). With a widening gulf between the form and its audience, the creators of musical theatre had to seek out new, perhaps even more specialized, audiences by incorporating new strategies and popular forms.

The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, while not a frequent subject in any histories of musical theatre, represented a new musical comedy hybrid coming out of the 1970s that combined the form of the integrated musical with a popular music and risqué subject matter. *Whorehouse* capitalized on the popularity of country music and a loosening of sexual mores to attract new audiences with its packaged Southern charm.

Moreover, the show's production in the South at the Fox Theatre – a venue as steeped in tradition as in modernization – afforded an opportunity for the musical to mean differently for its audiences than in previous performances in other venues and other cities. For the audience in attendance, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* provided an opportunity to dissect and discuss meanings of Southernness, including the relationship between the South and modernization and the implications of New South ideologies on the more traditional “Southern” way of life.

For an audience member attending *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* at the Fox Theatre, the show began in the lobby. Stepping into the front doors, patrons could not help but feel that they were being transported to another time and place, becoming an actor in some grand theatrical spectacle. The architecture itself transformed the building into an inherently theatrical space, as it depicted inside an outdoor, “ancient Middle Eastern courtyard, flanked by castellated walls with barred windows, capped by parapets and turrets” (22). Above the balcony, hung an enormous, striped canopy that appeared constructed of flowing silk fabric, although it actually was made of plaster covered-mesh. Surrounding the stage, there sat a large proscenium arch “topped by a bridge that reaches up to a magnificent cobalt blue sky” with actual twinkling stars, floating clouds, and a continually rising and setting sun (22). The ladies lounge on the dress circle depicted painstakingly reconstructed models of the thrones found in King Tut's tomb. The Gallery still bore the marks of segregation as portions of the wall that once divided black and white audience members could still be seen as well as the separate bathrooms and separate entrances that now served as emergency exits.

At the same time as the patron encountered this theatrical landscape, they also entered into a highly modern structure. The Fox Theatre had air conditioning five years before the White House. The unusual system of “‘washing’ air that has been sucked through a plenum” is still in use today and can efficiently cool the theatre in a mere ten minutes (Roberts 29). Air conditioning, as Pete Daniel states in *Standing at the Crossroads: Life in the South Since 1900*, “had a profound influence on Southern culture” drawing people indoors and out of the hot sun (220). Daniel posits that as a distinctly modern amenity, “people turned it on, much as they turned on the television, the radio, and appliances” (220). In “Air Conditioning in the South” (1984), Raymond Arsenault goes one step further, locating air conditioning at the forefront of a modernization movement that’s replacing “the South’s distinctive character” with “chain stores, tract houses, glassed-in high-rises, and, perhaps most important, enclosed shopping malls” (628). The Fox Theatre provides an interesting counterexample to Daniel’s and Arsenault’s arguments however as the building is both simultaneously invested in the project of modernization but dependent on nostalgia and “Southern particularism” for its very existence. My own experience as house staff illustrates this duality as well. During more formal occasions, we would wear a replica of the original uniforms worn by Fox employees during the height of its movie palace years. Yet, at the same time I would also hold and operate the latest Ticketmaster technology to scan tickets with a red laser beam. My embodied practice mirrors the inherent tensions present in the building itself. Similarly, preservationists, dedicated to maintaining the historical accuracy of the building, have continued to use the very latest technologies to restore the theatre. The Fox is one of only a handful of theatres that has a full time preservation department.

They are the ones who keep the illusion alive. Once the audience members sat down in the theatre in their carefully monogrammed seats with a golden F and the beautiful, bejeweled curtain rose, the auditorium transformed into the whorehouse, just as Joseph Litsch reported in his 1980 review.

In the plot of the 1978 musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, with music and lyrics by Carol Hall and book by Larry L. King and Peter Masterson, that unfolded before their eyes, “Texas has a whorehouse in it! Lord have mercy on our souls!” (Hall 34). In the small, country town of La Grange, Texas “in the shadows of the state capitol,” Miss Mona Stanglely – madam extraordinaire – operates a whorehouse affectionately known as the Chicken Ranch, so named because during hard times instead of paying the required three dollar fee, desperate gentlemen could exchange a live chicken for the ladies’ services (34). The local sheriff, Ed Earl Dodd, allows the whorehouse to operate, in part, because of his own love for Miss Mona but also because of his perceived “small town” values of live and let live. Melvin P. Thorpe, religious zealot and voice of the Watchdog radio program, makes it his personal crusade to close the whorehouse down and return morality to Texas. He enlists the help of the governor – a slick, corrupt, and “sidestepping” politician – more concerned with maintaining his power than serving his public (66). Elsewhere, the Aggies of Texas A&M have won a hard victory over the University of Texas and are treated – by a Senator none the less – to an evening at the whorehouse as a reward for their efforts. The Aggies visit to the whorehouse marks its last hurrah as reporters and politicians then descend on the whorehouse to close it down. The women of the Chicken Ranch must leave and Miss Mona must find a new home.

The primary inspiration for *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* was Larry L. King's April 1974 article "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas" found in the pages on *Playboy* magazine. In the article, King documents the closing of a whorehouse in a Grange, Texas, a "little town between Houston and Austin" (3). Instead of simply documenting the history of the Chicken Ranch and its inhabitants, King instead constructed more of a local history focusing on the relationship between the Chicken Ranch and the surrounding community and primarily relying on interviews with local citizens as his source material. As he stated, "because I didn't know much about the girls or the madam as individuals, I decided to focus on the hypocrisy of the politicians who had panicked and closed the whorehouse . . . and on the media's talent for turning molehills into mountains while dealing with the trivial rather than the profound" (6). For King, the closure of the whorehouse ultimately represented the triumph of destructive, duplicitous capitalism over a down home, "live and let live," more authentically "Texan" way of life. While certainly an interesting piece documenting the then current state of politics in Texas and a scathing critique of the potential overreaching power of the media, "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," the article, did not necessarily scream out to be made into a musical. Especially when its author, King, strongly objected to the very idea of musical comedy, famously declaring that "as a writer it irritates me when the story comes to a screeching halt so a bunch of bank clerks in candy-stripped coats and carrying matching umbrellas can break into a silly tap dance while singing about the sidewalks of New York" (King, *Whorehouse Papers* 13).

Peter Masterson, a fellow Texas native and New York transplant (husband of the original Mona, Carlin Glynn, and father of actor Mary Stuart Masterson), read the article

in *Playboy* and got the idea to transform it into a musical comedy. He contacted his good friend and fellow Texan Carol Hall and convinced her to contact King, who as fate would have it, had dated her younger sister back in Texas. These three Texans gathered together in a New York apartment and figured out how to adapt King's article for the stage. Despite frequent disagreements and battles over financial compensation, the trio managed to put together a show, due in no small part to Peter Masterson's magnificent ability to mediate disputes. After adding yet another Texan, choreographer and co-director Tommy Tune, to the collaborative team, the show premiered on Broadway on June 19, 1979 and played 1,584 performances. Subsequently, three separate national tours scoured the country, bringing the show to cities all across the country: Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, Washington, Detroit, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Houston, and Austin to name a few. The production that came to the Fox Theatre in January of 1980 was the fourth stop on the first national tour, a 14-month, 11 city swing, and its first performances in the Deep South.

Whorehouse, in telling the plight of Miss Mona and her whorehouse, offers a rich dichotomy that places images of a traditional way of life against those of an encroaching modern one, hell-bent on reform and change. For an Atlanta audience, these two opposing forces might be read as manifesting themselves as the Old and New South or simply a simpler way of life in conflict with the speed and complexities of the contemporary. These competing identities in the musical compel the audience to witness the debate and potentially choose sides. With this understanding, *Whorehouse* might be read as a sharp, critical political commentary on Southern history and as a viable musical for potentially progressive, transgressive performance.

The configuration of the traditional, simple way of Southern life in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* relies heavily on a mythology, as discussed in the introduction, that does not so much seek to reconstruct the South exactly or historically, but rather strives to return to a mythic, utopic re-visioning of the South. The project of mythologizing in the musical creates a place of abundance, earned success, genteel innocence, and a sense of community. The South in *Whorehouse* eventually becomes through this process of mythologizing, a down-home, simple, slow-paced paradise akin to the antebellum period where people, although committed to kinship, keep to themselves and mind their own business.

This positioning of Southern experience or identity as an image rather than a historical reenactment or reconstruction allows for greater flexibility in the representation of traditional social and political structures. For example, in terms of representations of Southern women, the traditional Southern way of life might not always have to emphasize a passive, genteel woman with no prospects but might also posit a Southern woman – like Scarlet O’Hara for instance – who, in the words of historian Anne Firor Scott in *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics*, possesses “the capacity, the health and energy and fortitude, to seize opportunity” and might “take advantage of the multiple options” and “shake loose from the tyranny of a single monolithic image of women” so that they might “struggle to be themselves” (230). Through the imagined character of Scarlet O’Hara, we might expand the notion of Southern woman of that time and disrupt the previously constructed, “monolithic image.” *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* employs similar techniques to suggest a similar reimagining of Southern woman and Southern life.

From the opening lines of dialogue introducing the first musical number, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* paints a vibrant picture of an imagined, idealized Old South but without the institution of slavery. The bandleader, initially serving as narrator, begins by telling the audience the grand tale of the infamous Chicken Ranch. He refers to it as “the nicest...little Whorehouse you ever saw” describing it in down-home, idyllic terms placing it “about a mile down this old dirt road” and emphasizing that “the barns were painted and the fences were up” (Hall 11). Moreover, he further idealizes its inhabitants commenting that “you might think to yourself, ‘why these folks would probably do to run the river with.’” (11). Within the initial musical numbers, “Prologue” and “Twenty Fans,” the Whorehouse displays many of the characteristics of this Southern location, complete with trees “as coolin’ as fresh lemonade,” “soft summer wind with a trace of perfume,” “watermelons all covered with vines,” “a vegetable garden and a few slender pines,” a “white painted fence with the roses in bloom” and a fan “turnin’ in every room” (11,13). These images, mostly tied to nature, present a luscious, green, untouched, untainted and almost Edenic, mythic South that maintains an innocence in its environment that its inhabitants also embody.

Employing language in a more covert, less palpable or descriptive way, the opening musical numbers also locate the use of an elusive, coy vocabulary within the whorehouse in conjunction with its Old Southern identity. The sundry, seedy details remain submersed beneath a layer of gentility and *Laissez-faire* politics. The mostly physical, natural descriptions of this environment give way to more detailed accounts of the interactions of the inhabitants of and visitors to this South in Miss Mona’s first musical number, “A Lil’ Ole Bitty Pissant Country Place.” Whereas Miss Mona does

refer to the simple, slow paced lifestyle through her colorful, colloquial references to the Whorehouse as “country,” “pissant,” and “piddly squattin’ ole time,” she chiefly refers to nature of the “business” going on at the ranch. Throughout the number she carefully constructs the whorehouse as a legitimate establishment entrenched in tradition where gentlemen might enjoy “one small thrill” but where “there’s nothing dirty going on” (Hall 21). The lackadaisical, carefree attitude conveyed mirrors the overall feeling of this Old South as a place where people both mind their own business and maintain a sense of community through shared knowledge (the community’s mutual agreement to remain silent about the whorehouse allows it to continue to operate in spite of the law). Miss Mona’s clientele also represents a broad spectrum of that community or population whereby they “get local businessmen, Bohemian farmers, [and] Congressmen from over in Austin” (21). The musical positions the whorehouse as a utopic environment where men of different classes, and even races, might convene for that “one small thrill” and put differences aside to enjoy the pleasure of a young ladies’ company.

When Miss Mona outlines the tenets of her business, she also relays the many rules and regulations for her girls, illustrating the presence of an idealized Old Southern identity in the construction of her ladies. Rather than serve solely as harsh restrictions and regulations to limit individual agency, more characteristic of the more modern, New Southern mentality as configured within the play, these rules highlight the potential freedom and flexibility afforded to these women under an alternative, reimagined older system. While Mona lists rules on telephone usage, proper language, cleanliness, and general decorum, she does so, in part, to assure a certain image for the public that they expect so that she might operate her business – that traditional antebellum picture of

genteel, servile women, willing to please. But Mona leaves space for maneuvering and some independence underneath the façade and within this system. In agreeing to “pay the food and the rent and the utilities” in exchange for keeping “their mind on [their] work responsibilities,” the girls maintain a financial independence as well as a reprieve from the constraints of marriage and family. Through Miss Mona’s business and its enactment of traditional Southern ideals, these women embody the image of ideal Southern womanhood while simultaneously defying social conventions and staking their own claim in a male dominated society.

Whorehouse juxtaposes this old Southern identity with a New Southern one configured as contemporary and mediated and borrowing heavily from conceptions of the New South championed throughout the South from Reconstruction to the present day. The New South, according to historian Paul M. Gaston, relied on an image of the South as “poor, frustrated, and despised, because it had, by decree of history, become entangled in wrong policies” (Grantham 25). To rescue the South from the depths of despair and ruin, New South proponents championed two main areas for reform: politics and religion. The basic project of the New South can be further reduced to two key terms or strategies – regulation and moralizing. To restore the South, reformers sought to establish new regulations and codes to mandate behavior and to institute and ensure order. On the political front, politicians became heralded as “knights in shining armor” and the ones who would redeem “the region from political error” and assure “conditions which [would] facilitate sectional reconciliation and material progress” (29). These reforms also sought to reestablish and strengthen the moral fiber of the South through moralizing rhetoric and religious regulation. Accompanying this push for regulation was a push for

modernization via increased technology and innovation that stood in direct opposition to the previous slow-paced, simplistic vision of the South. This Southern identity which in the musical advocates a hectic, fast-paced modern society directly challenges the more traditional identity embodied by the whorehouse.

Similar to the construction of Miss Mona as the stand in for and champion of an old Southern identity, *Whorehouse* introduces the New South identity through the characters of Melvin P. Thorpe, a rabid reformer and regulator, who wants to establish a new moral order at the expense of Miss Mona and the ladies of the Chicken Ranch and the Governor, a slick politician skilled in the rhetorical arts. As the chief instigator behind the crusade to close down the whorehouse, Melvin P. Thorpe seeks to restore morality to Texas. In the song “Texas Has a Whorehouse In It,” Thorpe addresses his listeners of the Watchdog radio program informing them of his new campaign to end the lawless abandon of the whorehouse and to separate those “bodies close together” and untangle those “arms and legs all re-arranged” (Hall 35). Thorpe categorizes the whorehouse as a morally deprived, dangerous cesspool where “mean eyed, juiced-up, brilliantined, honky tonk cowboys” mix with “green eyed, thin lipped, hard as nails peroxide blondes” acting “all depraved and loose and wild” (35). Championing the establishment and implementation of laws dictated by morality and religion, Thorpe manipulates multiple technologies (radio, television) to endorse a modern Southern identity that positions himself as a redeemer.

Likewise locating himself as liberator and leader, the Governor, embodies the political ramifications of this New South. In “The Sidestep,” he addresses his constituents, skillfully avoiding their actual questions, while all the while singing about

how he loves “to sweep around a widestep, cut a little swath and lead the people on” (66). The governor obviously cares more about his reelection and his own power than the actual concerns of his constituents. He uses his skills a master rhetorician to evade actually saying anything at all. He represents the victory in the New South of style over substance. Not until Thorpe presses the issue will the governor even take up the whorehouse and even then he determines that “someone, somewhere’s gonna have to close her down!” thus avoiding the direct implication of making any decision (68). Ultimately, the governor joins forces with Thorpe’s militant movement and orders the Chicken Ranch closed mainly to assure the support of the religious factions for future elections. Together, Thorpe and the governor represent the major figures of this New South within the musical. They push for religious and political regulation and reform and an end to the lawless, rustic ways of the more traditional, Old South of the whorehouse.

The musical also uses Thorpe and the governor to emphasize this New South’s intent to make the private public, as opposed to the Old South with its live and let live attitude. Interestingly, both figures also always exist within the public realm within the musical, surrounded by large crowds of people and demonstrating their broad appeal and devoted followings. Their public personas highlight the emphasis of style over substance associated with the overly-mediated New South presented in the show. Moreover, their reforms intend to make the private public – directing attention towards the clandestine whorehouse and its inhabitants. The two gentlemen’s public personas stand opposed to the private space and demeanor and the relative, if not self imposed, isolation of those representatives of the Old Southern identity.

Caught in the middle between these two opposing forces of Old and New is Doatsy Mae, the lovelorn, straight shooting waitress at the Texas Twinkle cafe “who wasn’t born yesterday” (Hall 47). Within the character of Doatsy, the audience sees an individual caught within these competing identities through the juxtaposition of her reality with her dreaming and fantasizing about alternative existences and identities like those afforded to Miss Mona and her girls via their imagined Old Southern identities. After stating her opinion that she would “trade places with” Miss Mona any day because “at least she ain’t on her feet all day” and subsequently getting chastised by the male clientele not to “hold her breath,” Mae freezes the scene and a spotlight “isolates” her as she sings “Doatsy Mae” (51). Throughout this musical number, Mae imagines an alternative, more liberated life for herself complete with “Fredericks of Hollywood” lingerie, girls with diamonds in their bellies, “Playboy queens,” and garter belts (53). In the context of the musical, Mae longs for an idealized Old South with which her circumstances will not allow her to identify. For each fantasy she creates, she answers herself with “I wanted to, I wanted to, but I never could” illustrating her inability to translate the fantasy into reality and her incapability to escape the New South morality imposed upon her. Moreover, Mae’s fantasies expand beyond even the whorehouse’s Old South identity allowing for the possibility of lesbian desire, and a imagined space outside the binary. The purposely-vague verse – “some girls have crazy secret thoughts, that can really make them fly. Some girls can even do the things they maybe think they’d like to try” – provides the possibility for a lesbian reading of this character, a sexuality unavailable to her within the confines of the society, either Old or New, in which she lives. Mae, “the one nobody thinks of havin’ dreams,” “ain’t as simple as she seems” but

nevertheless as a waitress in the Texas twinkle café, her economic and social situation require her to suppress her dreams. The musical number suggests that an alternative, more complex understanding of her own identity might improve her life, but her relative isolation and lack of possible identifications in her actual life limits her options and ultimately robs her of the opportunity.

Eventually the New Southern identity represses and takes over the traditional, Old one as Thorpe's crusade compels the sheriff to close the whorehouse down. Under the New South, regulations and moral codes are instituted that transform the previously carefree, lackadaisical, and private roles suggested in Mona's house rules fall into a rigid, hierarchical system with men on top, women beneath them, and alternative identities eliminated altogether. Ultimately the musical concludes bleakly with no happy ending. The New South victory does not usher in a new, golden age. In the musical, the New South, as a result of the religious watchdog organization and the corrupt political system, destroys the old, previously untouched system. The men are re-inscribed as the dominant victors, free to move about society: the Texas A & M football team remain the heroes despite their dalliances at the whorehouse and emerge from the controversy unscathed. The women of the whorehouse bear the burden of this imposed New Southern ideology. They must leave their home and abandon their safe haven to face uncertain futures without the guidance of Miss Mona or Jewel, her assistant, and with few options. In "Hard Candy Christmas," the musical number they sing as they pack and prepare to leave, they do not sing about getting jobs or an education but rather they sing "maybe I'll dye my hair," "maybe I'll sleep real late. Maybe I'll lose some weight," and "Maybe I'll just get drunk on apple wine" (Hall 81). They no longer have the confidence in their

abilities or the independence to control their own futures, expressed in earlier musical numbers. Poor Doatsy Mae, the hapless waitress from the Texas Twinkle Café who “never could” now simply never can and disappears (52). Her alternative gender construction which barely had a place in the former system certainly has no place within the strict new hierarchical system. Mae’s disappearance and the whorehouse’s desertion mark the New South as a restrictive, regimented region hardly the technologically advanced, progressive paradise of the propaganda. For a musical that markets itself as a feel good “musical comedy,” *Whorehouse* leaves the audience with a rather austere, forlorn vision: A nostalgic, distant image of an traditional, simple Old South destroyed and decimated through corrupt political and religious figures embodying the influx of more New Southern mentalities – attempts to “Northernize” the South through reform and governmental interference.

Atlanta audiences responded quite positively to the production in part due to clever marketing. *The Atlanta Constitution* assisted the audience by running a series of articles about the production in the January 4th, 1980 issue, five days before its official opening. These articles attempted to connect the production to the local audience and provide them an investment in the production. One article, entitled “Alexis Smith: Call Her Madam,” profiles Alexis Smith, the actor portraying Miss Mona on the national tour and highlighted her previous reputation as Broadway and Hollywood’s “sophisticated lady” (*Alexis Smith* 1-B). The article places this image in juxtaposition to her role as Miss Mona as if assuring the reader that she is not actually a madam. Smith is quoted as saying that the musical “has the greatest title in the world’ (qtd in *Alexis Smith* 10-B). A companion article, entitled “Atlanta Adds Spice to Salty Texas Comedy,” profiles Amy

Miller, the actor portraying Ruby Rae, and Bob Moyer, who stars as newspaper man Edsel Mackey, and emphasizes their ties to the city. This piece directly connects the production to Atlanta and again gives the local audience an investment in the production. The final piece, titled, “I Want Tickets to . . . Er . . . ‘The . . . Ah . . . Best’,” recounts the hilarious experiences of the Fox Theatre box office in dealing with patrons embarrassed to say the title of the show. Box office manager David Stewart recalls people referring to the show only as “The Best,” “that play,” or “that show about Texas” (qtd, in *I Want 1-B*). These incidents mark the embodied interaction between the audience and the show even before the curtain rises. The article continues to tell of the troubles the advertising campaign ran into in the show's early existence. Bus placards in New York that proclaimed “come on down to the whorehouse” were forcibly removed by declaration of the city council while some cities required a new title all together, “The Best Little Chicken Ranch in Texas” (1-B). Public relations coordinator, Warren Knowles, is quoted as saying that “some radio and TV stations don’t want the ads to run during prime time” (qtd in *I Want 1-B*).

The city of Atlanta, however, had no such objections. Large print ads ran in *The Atlanta Constitution* and television spots hailed its arrival. Atlanta’s treatment of the show and its decision not to censor the marketing campaign indicates that the city perhaps sought to portray a more sophisticated image than other cities on the tour, and perhaps even New York City itself. After providing a summary of the production history of the musical, the article concludes by heralding the ability of the show to “destroy the colorful language barrier and far into the hinterlands, well removed from the supposed evils of New York and Los Angeles, people are lining up to get into *The Best Little*

Whorehouse in Texas” (*I Want* 10-B). This final statement again makes a claim for Atlanta’s sophistication and positions the citizens of Atlanta as active participants in projecting this image to the rest of the nation through their attendance at the show.

Critics and audiences in New York and the rest of the country responded to the show in a similarly positive manner generally refraining from painting Texas or the South as unsophisticated or banal. Clive Barnes of *The New York Post* called the show “a strange, old-fashioned, new-fashioned musical, full of simple sentiments, dirty words, political chicanery and social hypocrisy, decent jokes, indecent jokes, bubbling performances and music with a bustle” (qtd. in Suskin 91). Barnes’s comments illustrate his recognition of the multiples forces at work within the play. Christopher Sharp of *Women’s Wear Daily* commented that *Whorehouse* offered “an evening that is respectably profane” again picking up on the juxtapositions present within the show (qtd. in Suskin 92). In his review in the *Daily News*, Douglas Watt even goes as far as to call the musical “100% American” and declared that “being both sunny enough and funny enough” it “may change things with its cheerful disregard for reality” (qtd. in Suskin 93). These reviews point to a national feeling that this musical tapped into current regional and perhaps even national tensions via its down-home, country trappings. As Watt stated at the end of his review, “I’m only surprised they don’t sell Girl Scout cookies in the lobby” (93).

Ironically, one of the few negative reviews can be found in the June 1978 *Texas Monthly*. In it, reviewer W. L. Taitte criticizes the show for trying “to be too many things” and trying “to reach too many truths at once” (132). Taitte’s further comments reveal a measure of regional-critique as he states “when someone gets the gumption to

mount a Texas production, I fear it is unlikely to be able to match the New York one, which is a model example of how to do a musical the right way” (132). His honest assessment of the Texas theatrical community and its “more conservative institutional theatres” reminds that this musical, although created by Southerners, was workshopped and further developed in New York and thus takes with it as it travels the country a bit of the urban influence.

Perhaps because of Atlanta’s status as a burgeoning urban center, the story of the musical related easily to their own experiences as residents in a city grappling with many of these same issues as evidenced by its popular support in the press and at the box office. The show enjoyed near full houses for its entire two-week run as Atlantans appeared to connect in some way to the cautionary tale being presented onstage. Sitting in a theatre constructed in the midst of the battle between old and new in a city professed by scholars throughout the twentieth century as the beacon of the New South, audiences could not help but identify with some of the issues expressed on stage. While the music, which tapped into current trends in combining traditional country music with a popular music aesthetic, certainly entertained the audience, the lasting image of the end of the play, with the ladies moving out of the house and leaving for uncertain futures, had to give some people pause.

With the release of the feature film, only two years after the Atlanta premiere in 1982, *Whorehouse* entered a new phase in its representations of conflicting Southern identities. Just as the Atlanta production had allowed the story of the whorehouse to stand in for larger issues affecting the city and region, the film broadened the story to encompass the entire South. The primary way the film accomplished this was through

casting. Rather than casting native Texans to play the roles, the film's producers decided upon Dolly Parton, a native of Tennessee, for the role of Miss Mona and Burt Reynolds, a native Georgian, for the role of the Sheriff, a part Larry L. King originally wanted Willie Nelson to play. Their participation in the film necessitated a wider understanding of Southern identity since Parton and Reynolds were both so closely associated with already established representations of Southern identity – Parton through her music and Reynolds through his films, including *Cannonball Run* and *Deliverance*. Though the film was a box office flop, its interpretation of the story, even with additional songs by Parton including “I Will Always Love You,” contributed to the ability of this musical to be read as a commentary on the conflicting forces of an Old and New South. Parton's and Reynold's already established Southern identities make the film a fascinating study in how an actor's identity interacts with the issues of identity already present in a script or screenplay.

When *Whorehouse* returned to the Fox Theatre in May of 2001, the reception was not nearly as warm as the first national tour. With Ann-Margret in the role of Miss Mona, the show appeared to have lost its edge. It no longer appeared to have the potential impact it possessed in its 1980 run. Theatre reviewer Kathy Janich declared the production “a cheap date, but not in a good way” and stated that while “this isn't the worst ‘Little Whorehouse in Texas’ . . . it may be the most tepid” (F5). Janich located most of the productions difficulties on the leading lady, saying “she is miked so heavily she sounds like the voice of God pounding in our ears” (F5). Ann-Margret failed to fully embody the character of Mona, relying on her sultry and sexy reputation and failing to infuse the character with the savvy and strength of Alexis Smith's 1980 performance.

Although Janich does remind the reader of the musical's topical content, this production failed both to attract an audience and to convey any meaningful message about conflicting Southern identities. As an employee at the Fox theatre during this production, I was shocked at the number of people who left just after the show began outraged at the "immoral content" presented onstage. I asked my coworkers who had been around for the 1980 production if similar incidents happened with that production. They related that no such events occurred in 1980, thus leading me to the horrifying realization that perhaps the city of Atlanta had fallen victim to the fate *Whorehouse* so astutely warns against. It was certain that Atlanta had changed, but I became less certain that it was for the better.

* * *

Only two years after the 1980 Atlanta premiere of *Whorehouse*, a four-week run of a traveling production of *The King and I*, starring Yul Brynner, was recognized by *Performance* magazine as the highest grossing road show in the United States for the year (Roberts 46). In contrast to its previous reputation as a movie palace, the Fox Theatre has since established itself as primarily a musical theatre house, playing host to two separate series: Broadway Across America and Theatre of the Stars operated by Chris Manos. The theatre also houses the Atlanta Ballet, the longest consistently running ballet company in the United States, the Delta International Performance Series, a summer film festival, and up until 2004, was the home of the Atlanta Opera. The theatre also continues its tradition of presenting a variety of musical artists from Harry Connick Jr., James Taylor, and Dolly Parton to Pearl Jam, Death Cab for Cutie, and The Rolling Stones. The Fox now sits at the center of urban renewal efforts with condo building

sprouting up on every street corner. Yet unlike 1975 where the Fox was thought to be an expendable byproduct of such expansion, its now one of the primary selling points used to convince suburbanites to move back into the city.

The year after *Whorehouse* revival, the city of Atlanta experienced great change as well. Andrew Young was elected mayor. Hartsfield International Airport briefly replaced O'Hare as the busiest airport in terms of passengers for the first time. The population of Metro Atlanta surpassed 2 million making it the 16th largest city while other figures showed the city was now 66 percent black. In the years that followed, the city continued sculpting and refining its image as a national and international city. Finally all their efforts paid off when on September 18th, 1990, President Juan Antonio Samaranch announced that Atlanta had been awarded the 1996 Olympic Games. This truly global event would finally allow the city, in the words of Atlanta's own chief Olympic booster, Bill Payne, spread "Southern hospitality, a constant theme of the Atlanta bid, around the world" (qtd. in Newman 255).

A Conclusion

“Taking the Long Way”:

Southern Identities and Popular Performance

in the Twenty-first Century

“The South becomes not damnable, but marvelously useful, as a mirror in which the nation can see its blemishes magnified, so that it will hurry to correct them” – Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (1964)

“The Southern pageant will go on, but it has become pretty clear that we’re all actors, coconspirators, secret sharers in the drama” – Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (1996)

Throughout this dissertation, I have positioned the popular theatrical event as a location of identity formation and contestation. For the audiences in antebellum New Orleans, rural Appalachia in the late nineteenth century, and downtown Atlanta in the early twentieth century, performance provided them an opportunity to witness contemporary and historical Southern mythology enacted on stage and allowed them the occasion to reassert, redefine, or replenish their own Southern identities in relation to

what they saw onstage. Popular theatre provided them the opportunity to partake of this experience both as individuals and as a part of the temporarily gathered collective of the audience and created active interactions where audience members may or may not be hailed by the representations they see onstage.

I argue that these theatrical moments had psychological and material power, changing and challenging not only the way audience members thought of themselves and others but also questioning material practices in their everyday lives as consumers and inhabitants of an increasingly modernized world. Taking place in front of a back drop of modernization, these commercial, profit-driven theatrical events also challenged audience members to specifically consider the relationship between their understanding of their Southern identity and the ramifications of modernization on their way of life. For those in attendance at the Appalachian medicine shows, for example, they witnessed a sales pitch which incorporated new ideas of cleanliness and overall increased standards of living that directly reflected the impact of modernization and its affects on everyday life. Moreover, the burlesques of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in New Orleans highlighted tensions within the city between a nostalgia for the Old South and the encroaching forces of modernization represented by Stowe and her novel made possible primarily because of increasingly sophisticated means of printing and circulating news and information. The audiences of *Whorehouse* at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta enjoyed a multi-layered experience viewing a show about the impact of modernization, depicted through a media frenzied culture of television and tabloid news, in a historical, yet thoroughly modern building. The theatrical space allows for a variety of ideas and opinions to exist simultaneously onstage and requires the audience's active participation to make meaning

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have seen continued change in what it means to be Southern. As communication technology grows ever more sophisticated and media finds new and myriad ways to broadcast images and words throughout the country and the world, new Southern myths emerge and old ones circulate with a rapidity heretofore unseen. The processes of determining, maintaining, and challenging Southern identities in response to these myths become ever more difficult. As a result, the fear of saturation (re)emerges, of fading into what George W. Cable called in 1882, a “No South,” no more Southern than it is Northern and completely indistinguishable from the rest of the United States (43-44). Old fears of the South losing its identity combine with new technologies in surprising ways. Whereas old mythology, like idyllic plantations and women in hoopskirts, as historian Smith has argued in *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind* (1985), “maintained its hegemony in large part because it was quite easy for the keepers of the myth to control the images and symbols available to the public,” these new myths, like those circulated via radio and television in *Whorehouse* of the South as an evangelical paradise, exist just beyond grasp and resist individual or even collective control (Smith 153). While Smith argues for this as a time when “Southern mythmakers should have an even greater opportunity to define and redefine reality for the benefit of the region as well as the rest of the nation,” he fails to consider the potential negative ramifications of such a setup particularly in an increasingly mediated society. For while there is a perceived lack of control in the circulation of these images, and in the identities formed in relation to them, that certainly does not necessarily create a utopic environment outside of societal conditions and interactions, free from political and economic forces. The process of radical

contextualization reminds that while such mythmaking may appear benevolent and auspicious on the surface, the machinations occurring underneath may offer an alternative, more sinister reality.

The career path of the Dixie Chicks, an all women country trio, and their recent public trials provide such a cautionary tale. And while they are not traditional theatrical performers, their stage shows and command of the media demonstrate the merging of theatre with popular music and the affects of modernization on all kinds of performance. Moreover, the shifting composition of their audience provides an example of how the methodology of radical contextualization might help to trace a trajectory of Southern identities across a period of time.

In the September 2002 issue of *American Heritage* magazine, a publication known for its often historical conservative leanings, an article appeared titled “Dixie’s Victory: Southern Pop Culture Conquers America” written by assistant editor Joshua Zeitz. The first two pages of the article contains a large, glossy, color photo that continues over the page divide of The Dixie Chicks performing at the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville, Tennessee. Zeitz argues that while the South may have indeed lost the Civil War, they have since been successfully waging a battle to “capture American culture” (46). In the areas of sports, entertainment, and religion, he contends, the South has prevailed in infiltrating all levels of culture and making the Southern the national. Amid other examples such as the popularity of NASCAR and the national growth of religious fundamentalism, Zeitz positions country music as taking center stage nationally, “triumphing at the moment when the South itself began to modernize demographically and economically” and marking “both Dixie’s triumph and its metamorphosis” (53).

Though he never mentions the group by name, his placement of the Dixie Chick's photo at the beginning of the article identifies them as leaders in this movement. Their name itself combines the Old South mythology of Dixie with the more modern, colloquial language of the word "chick." When combined together, the two words suggest a band steeped in the musical traditions of the Old South but with a contemporary, perhaps even quasi-feminist sensibility. A consideration of their history as a band and the moment they went from being the spokeswomen for a new South to the bane of the country music industry illustrates the interplay between this group and changing Southern mythologies and identities, both their audience's and their own.

The historical trajectory of the Dixie Chicks charts an evolution of Southern identity against the backdrop of alternating Southern mythologies as the band went from a more traditional bluegrass and country style to the unique musical amalgamation found on their recent albums *Wide Open Spaces*, *Fly*, *Home*, and *Taking the Long Way*. Throughout their early years, the band struggled to define its sound. The original configuration of the Texas group was sisters Martie and Emily Erwin, both in their early twenties, and Laura Lynch and Robin Lynn Macy, both in their early thirties. They primarily performed as a novelty country act playing county fairs and rodeos and specializing in performing the national anthem at Dallas Stars and Texas Rangers games. They excelled in performing four part harmonies in country classics like "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." Relying heavily on the tradition of singing cowboys such as Dale Evans and Gene Autry, they wrote many of their own songs and frequently performed wearing retro-western fringed costumes complete with bright red lipstick, mini-skirts, cowboy hats, and boots. "Thank Heavens for Dale Evans," written by Martie

Erwin and Macy, typified their early recordings. It contained a traditional country western sound (slide guitar and twang) but with a distinctly bluegrass touch (often noted by the presence of a banjo or fiddle) and offered a loving homage to cowgirls of the past. In this configuration, the Dixie Chicks achieved mild success, recording their albums in a studio in Dallas, performing at smaller venues throughout the Midwest, and even having a few of their songs showcased as background music on the CBS series *Northern Exposure* (Collins 39-43).

Following these minor successes, the Dixie Chicks found themselves questioning their identity and direction. As Ace Collins remarks in his *All About the Dixie Chicks*, “[fans] had to be asking if their favorite songbirds were going to devote themselves to embracing the past and be satisfied with being considered a novelty act or were going to drop the pigeonholing trappings that painted them as nothing more than a female version of Riders in the Sky” (47). In their then current configuration, although they had made a name for themselves in Dallas, they had received no interest from record labels. Even though they made an attempt to widen their appeal while still remaining true to their novelty roots, ultimately the band decided that to increase their commercial appeal and be taken seriously as female artists, they had to abandon many of the retro-western, fringe elements of their previous incarnation. As a result of this effort to create a more “authentic” sound, Robin Lynn Macy grew increasingly frustrated, having always favored folk music over the commercialism of Nashville. Refusing to embrace the movement towards a larger commercial market after seeing the outfits, music, and performance style she had created for the band abandoned, Macy left the Dixie Chicks.

Now a trio, the Dixie Chicks – Emily and Martie Erwin and Laura Lynch – set their sights on the country music industry and a more authentic, country persona apart from their novelty, fairground beginnings. Their music, while still infused with the fiddles and banjos of bluegrass, incorporated more of a modern country sound, with guitars and a more produced sound, like that of Reba McEntire or early Faith Hill. For the recording of the single “She’ll Find Better Things to Do,” the Chicks brought in legendary steel guitar player Lloyd Maines. This event not only marked an attempt to incorporate an already authenticated country performer, but also introduced his daughter Natalie to the band’s music. While critics compared the new sound to Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt, and Emmylou Harris’s work on their *Trio* recording projects and praised their efforts, their albums failed to attain any real commercial success. In “Continental Drift,” a brief article in the section “Unsigned Artists and Regional News” from a June 4, 1994 *Billboard* magazine, Laura Lynch was quoted as saying, “Our strength is in songs we engage the audience in live . . . Record labels want something we are not. We think we are about to hit a happy medium” (Orr 1). Yet the Erwin sisters grew increasingly frustrated with their inability to sign with a record label and began to focus on Lynch’s voice as the primary reason for their limited success. Reflecting on their decision to ask Lynch to leave the band in a 1998 interview with *Country Music* magazine, Emily said:

The truth is Martie and I started to feel limited creatively. We felt we needed the next caliber singer. We talked to Laura. We knew she was getting sick of not progressing further than we had. She had a teenage daughter, and road life was really wearing her down. She said she didn’t

want to keep going unless something happened. She understood we had to make a change. (qtd. in Collins 98)

Although the exact details of Lynch's departure remain unknown and many conflicting accounts exist, Lynch did leave the band in 1995. With Lynch's departure, the Erwin sister sought out a new lead singer.

Emily and Martie found their new lead singer in Lloyd Maines's daughter Natalie, a young, 21-year-old "free spirit whose interests included all kinds of sounds and musical styles, but not cowgirl music" (Collins 102). With the addition of Natalie, who *Time* magazine in 2006 called "one of those people born middle finger first," the last remnants of the fringe-covered, big-haired cowgirl image faded away in favor of a more sophisticated, youthful style and the group gained musical legitimacy through the Maines' country lineage via her father, as well as a broader appeal to the entire Southern region rather than just Texas (Tyrangiel 61). Emily recalls Natalie saying "I dig your music, but I'm not wearing stupid clothes" (qtd. in Collins 104). The group, at Natalie's urging, shed any likeness to the old Southern myth of genteel, passive women and embraced more powerful, direct, and even feisty personas, associated more with the New South. With Maines in place as lead vocalist, the Dixie Chicks also adopted a new sound that mixed bluegrass, exemplified by Emily and Martie's banjo and fiddle playing, and their country roots, represented by the presence of slide and steel guitars, with Natalie's searing vocals and rock sensibilities, epitomized by the inclusion of electric guitars. The mixture of sounds combined with a new, young, rebellious image; The Dixie Chicks were no longer a nostalgic female cowgirl act, but young, vibrant women on the cutting edge of something new in country music. Their first album together, *Wide Open Spaces*, had

three consecutive singles hit number one on the country charts and sold 11 million copies, becoming the biggest-selling album by a country group in history. Tee-shirts that had once read “the rooster crows, but the hen delivers” were replaced with ones reading “Chicks Rule” and “Chicks Kick Ass” (Bufwack & Oermann 496). The Dixie Chicks cemented their new, irreverent image by getting matching chicken-feet tattoos on the tops of their feet for each career milestone.

The Dixie Chick’s popularity rested in their location as a musical act both inside and outside of the mainstream. Their rebellious image attracted audiences not accustomed to traditional country music. As Bufwack and Oermann state in *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000*, “The trio’s irreverent, uninhibited interviews and quirky, let’s-play-dress-up fashion sensibilities appealed to pop music fans. The humorous, slumber party atmosphere they exuded and the girl-power style in their songs drew more than 2 million people to their concerts in 1999 and 2000” (496). Their fan base included many young females who identified with these twenty-somethings. Young female audiences could see a lot of themselves in the innocent rebellion of the Dixie Chicks in line with the long tradition of identifying with the personal in country music, like Loretta Lynn’s famous song about birth control, “The Pill.” Natalie, Emily, and Martie gestured towards the past and the future and in their music combined venerable and innovative sounds together to create something new that captured the feeling of many young women, Southern and not, like themselves on the brink of adulthood. Their musical combination of the traditional and modern mirrored the state of many young people as they leave home and the familiar to venture towards

new opportunities and “wide open spaces.” Thus their own identities reflected that of their audiences.

Although they achieved a great deal of popular, cross-over appeal, the Dixie Chicks never denied their country roots and, as a result, maintained credibility within Nashville often denied to other cross-over country artists like LeAnn Rimes. In an interview with *The Tennessean*, Martie commented on the Dixie Chick’s new fans:

Fans will come up to us and say, ‘I hate country music, but I love ya’ll. Ya’ll aren’t country.’ And we just giggle under our breath . . . We’re a country group. That’s what our expertise is in. I mean, Emily plays the banjo, for God’s sake. I play the fiddle. Natalie’s got that undeniable twang that she will never be able to escape with all the speech therapy in the world. (qtd. in Bufwack & Oermann 496)

The Dixie Chick’s mixing of musical styles attracted new audiences while their devotion to and reverence for country music allowed the Nashville industry to embrace their music. As Natalie said, “we take pride that we’re bringing back older, traditional sounding things and making it sound more modern” (qtd. in Bufwack and Oermann 496). In essence, the Dixie Chick’s country roots and authenticity as musicians allowed them to take on a variety of roles in performance including the persona of the Southern rebel and still succeed commercially.

With their second studio album *Fly*, the Dixie Chicks began to assert themselves more as performers. They demanded to play their own instruments in the studio and to have more control over their sound. The result was an album “even more country than the first” (Bufwack & Oermann 496). Yet the album maintained the mixture of

traditional country, exemplified through “classic country weepers” like “Cold Day in July” and “Without You,” with more modern offerings. As Bufwack and Oermann state, “The Dixie Chicks were not prisoners of tradition. On the romping ‘Sin Wagon’ Natalie stated her intention to go out, have a ball, and do some ‘mattress dancin’ . . . the achingly poetic ‘Heartbreak Town’ seemed to be an indictment of Nashville show business” (496-7). No matter which end of the spectrum the Dixie Chicks went to in terms of musical style, their fans embraced their performances. Audiences “shrieked for Emily’s banjo solos and Martie’s hoedown fiddling in a way normally reserved for heavy-metal rock guitar solos” (497). *Fly* sold 10 million copies and won the Dixie Chicks four Grammy Awards and nine CMA (Country Music Association) trophies, including the Entertainer of the Year.

As a result of their success as performers, they were then able to assume more actively roles of businesswomen. Aside from insisting on getting to play their own instruments in the studio, they signed with a powerful L.A. management firm, the Firm – similar to Dolly Parton nearly twenty years earlier when she made her first foray into Hollywood. Under new management, the Dixie Chicks filed a lawsuit against their record label Sony for \$4.1 million dollars in unpaid royalties and demanded that they be let go from their one-sided, unfair recording contracts. As John Springer observed in *The Texas Monthly*, “The Chicks could turn the entire music business upside down. If they are successful, the case could change the way all recording contracts are written, finally making such deals as friendly to the artists as they are to labels” (qtd. in Bufwack & Oermann 499). With *Fly*, the Dixie Chicks asserted themselves more as performers and

demonstrated to their fans that they were beginning to mature into savvy entrepreneurs and young, intelligent women of the New South.

With the release of *Home*, the Dixie Chick's third studio album, the band achieved its most widespread popular success and further cemented their multifaceted Southern identities, crossing borders and refusing categorization. While their first single "Long Time Gone" received heavy play on country stations, their cover of the Stevie Nicks's classic "Landslide" got consistent play on pop radio. The third single, "Traveling Solider," even became an unofficial anthem for soldiers departing for the Middle East for Operation Iraqi Freedom. The album's acoustic, simplified, more mature style marked a departure from some of the more overtly theatrical, produced fare on their earlier albums.

During the international tour in support of the *Home* album, *The Top of the World Tour*, the Dixie Chicks underwent a major challenge to their Southern identities that they had constructed for themselves that had resulted in millions of dollars in record sales and worldwide popularity. The tongue-in-cheek, often flirty stage banter of earlier concerts, the extended instrumental sequences with Martie and Emily on banjo and fiddle, and the lively performances of songs about deadbeat husbands, heroic cowboys, and rides on the "Sin Wagon," that had all contributed to the group's performed Southern identity onstage could do little to protect them from larger political ideologies circulating on the eve of the war in Iraq. While performing in England in front of a crowd comprised of what she thought were mostly transported Texans with the United States and England at war against Iraq, Natalie said the following: "Just so you know, we're ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas" (Primetime Live 5). As a direct result of this

statement, radio stations across the country almost immediately refused to play any Dixie Chick songs and sales of their new album *Home* plummeted. Other country artists, including Toby Keith, publicly condemned the band as anti-American and unpatriotic, some even writing super-patriotic anthems in response. Some conservatives called for all Americans to boycott their music or even to attend public ceremonies where steamrollers would destroy mounds of Dixie Chicks merchandise and compact discs. Cartoons emerged with Saddam Hussein alongside Natalie, Emily, and Martie with the words “Saddam’s Angels.” From the response to Natalie’s statement, it became apparent that the Dixie Chicks, despite their great successes, were not impervious to public opinion. Their rebellion had gone a step too far and the public punished them with decreased record sales, public scolding via (mostly conservative) talk radio, and even anonymous death threats. The already sold out national Top of the World tour went on nonetheless, with a few modifications. Metal detectors were now included at every arena as well as other increased security measures. The Dixie Chicks went forward relatively undeterred.

Yet the ramifications of Natalie’s stage banter would continue to impact the band well after the tour wrapped up. The band’s very identity as Southern performers was called in question. Identified as simultaneously Texan and Southern despite, as Celeste Ray puts it, “the ambivalence of Texans in defining themselves as part of the South,” the Dixie Chicks played into the continued construction of a Southern mythology around changing conceptions of Southern femininity, from passive to active (5). Before the remarks on Bush, the band had enjoyed flirting with the boundaries of these mythologies creating identities for themselves that existed both within and outside of those traditional constructions. Yet following Natalie’s remarks, they no longer enjoyed the privileged

dual status they created through their music and live performances. Their stage banter no longer reflected a brassy Southern attitude but now was reduced to potential political fodder for their critics. Moreover, outside forces conspired to silence their voices all together attempting to deny them the opportunity to perform or sing at all. They became outsiders and no longer benefited from an association to the country music establishment. Country radio refused to play their music and the band was left unable to write their actions off as mere folly or naiveté. In fact, they refused to do so and, in turn, constructed new identities for themselves that thrust them into the political arena and aligned them with a more rock and roll attitude than country demeanor. The shift forced them to seek out a new audience, something almost unheard of in popular music, as many of their former audience abandoned their support and decried their sudden politicization. The release of their album *Taking the Long Way* in May of 2006 would prove the ultimate test case for this new identity and reveal to the world a new, differently Southern Dixie Chicks.

The release of *Taking the Long Way* presented to the world a new Dixie Chicks armed with a different sound and a new, more reflective attitude. The band maintained the spunk that had been the root of its earlier successes, but it was now politicized. These women were, as their first single suggested, “not ready to make nice” and their defiance signaled new identities crafted in response to the very public outcry against them and their music. Country had abandoned them; many of their country fans and fellow artists had turned their back on the group while the country music industry failed to offer even a hint of support. Natalie was quoted as saying:

“For me to be in country music to begin with was not who I was . . . I

would be cheating myself . . . to go back to something that I don't wholeheartedly believe in. So I'm pretty much done. They've shown their true colors. I like lots of country music, but as far as the industry and everything that happened . . . I couldn't be farther away from that."

("Country Radio" 2)

While the album immediately rose to the top of the album sales charts and became one of the most downloaded albums of 2006, radio, country and otherwise, refused to play their new singles. Many radio managers cited a lack of audience interest or the band's "self-indulgent and selfish lyrics" as their rationale (2). But it would not be until months later, when the Dixie Chicks participated in hearings on Capital Hill regarding radio regulations, that it would be revealed that the chief reason for the lack of airplay was not audience complaints but that the major companies that owned the majority of radio stations in the United States, like Cumulus and Clear Channel, had issued orders from the top banning the airplay of their music.

Despite Clear Channel and other radio company's attempts to thwart the success of the Dixie Chicks, their music found an audience, albeit a new and not entirely Southern one. Their new musical identity aligned them more with Bruce Springsteen, Don Henley, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young than more traditional country artists. This new sound came, in part, due to their work with producer Rick Rubin who previously worked on albums for The Red Hot Chili Peppers, System of the Down, and Johnny Cash. Commenting on their changing fan base, Martie remarked that the group would rather have fans who "get it than people that have us in their five-disc changer with Reba McEntire and Toby Keith" (two artists who publicly ridiculed the band). In

essence, their previous identities as Southerners, the very foundation of their stage and public personas, failed to contain their “bad” behavior or provide them adequate tools to help them weather this media crisis so they were forced to look to other models to construct their new identities. In the current political climate with the U.S. at war, Southern, in this specific instance, became aligned with patriotism and the administration and the Dixie Chicks subsequently became aligned with sedition and liberalism. As a result the subsequent North American tour sold well in most Northern and Western cities, selling out most Canadian dates, while sales struggled throughout Midwest and Southern venues. In fact, after the initial release of tour dates, a revised tour schedule was issued with additional dates in Canada, the West and North, and Australia, and the elimination of some dates in the Midwest and South. The shift in tour trajectory dramatically illustrated the shift in the composition of their fan base. And while the album failed to impress the country music industry, failing to earn a single Country Music Award or Academy of Country Music nomination, the album won five Grammy awards, including a sweep of the three major categories, album, record, and song of the year, the first to do so since Eric Clapton in the early nineties, and was the first country album to win album of the year since Glen Campbell in 1969. The single, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” the band’s direct answer to all their critics, earned record and single of the year.

The recent Grammy wins and healthy album sales seem to indicate the acceptance of the Dixie Chicks by a new audience and the success of their new identities in resurrecting and rescuing their careers. They wisely adapted their new identities to an increasingly mediated society using all forms of media from television to the internet, with the exception of radio, to sell their new identities as politicized, progressive subjects.

They even took the additional step of appearing in the documentary *Shut Up and Sing* which recorded the entire controversy and gave audiences a backstage perspective of their lives throughout the past few years. The example of the Dixie Chicks reminds that control of the media remains a contentious issue and while individuals certainly have more access to media there still exist many corporations and conglomerates that strive to control and manipulate communication. The Dixie Chicks also illustrate, however, the ability of individuals to, as Smith states, “define and redefine reality” to find ways of controlling the circulation of images to create and construct, recreate and reconstruct, their own identities along with and in opposition to the prevailing mythologies. The power of the audience to virtually force the group to abandon their previous identity and assume a new one illustrates the power a collective body – organized loosely in this case – can alter and police the use of Southern identities. Similar to the fate of the women at the end of *Whorehouse*, the Dixie Chicks were driven to find a way out of their predicament without the use of the former identities that had allowed them great freedom in the New South.

Although not a specific theatrical performance like those offered previously, the example of the Dixie Chicks illustrates how such methodologies as those I use throughout the dissertation might provide insight into other areas of popular culture. Such tools might also be useful in looking at how other performers have used and constructed Southern identities and what that meant for their audiences. In the recent past, popular performers such as Britney Spears and Madonna have used Southern identity successfully in various ways to defend public actions and promote a new style respectively. Britney Spears has often used her identity as a rural Louisiana native to

justify her often criticized, much publicized public embarrassments. Madonna, on the other hand, in her 2001 *Drowned World Tour*, performed a Southern character onstage, toasting a large rifle while singing a facsimile of a Southern folk song about a man who done her wrong. Both these artists profited from these representations both publicly and monetarily. Yet for Spears, she has been unable to rely on that identity to excuse her recent bouts with alcohol and drugs, post giving birth to her two sons. Her public displays of bad mothering – letting her infant son “drive” the car, almost dropping her infant on the sidewalk – in essence revealed her as a bad Southerner, even by the previously low standards she had constructed with her rural Louisiana identity. As a result, Spears has created a new, alternative identity shaving her head and embracing an almost punk aesthetic. Like the Dixie Chicks, she had to move beyond her already established identity once her audience denied her access to her previous one.

This project might help to understand how to make meaning of these performances of identity and how to begin to understand the complicated (and sometimes shockingly uncomplicated as in the case of the Dixie Chicks) relationships between these performers and their audiences and how, where, and why identity construction and reconstruction is occurring. The theatrical event provides us a useful model for considering a wide array of performances that need not occur in a traditional performance venue. Often these performances off or backstage tell more about the construction of identities than those occurring onstage. From the perspective of radical recontextualization, all those performances necessarily contribute to the overall understanding of the event. Ascertaining the entirety of the collected performances allows for a more complete understanding of the way identities circulate and privileges

the importance of process in both the creation of performance and identity itself, both for the examples considered here and more broadly. Still, many difficult questions haunt this project around identity: How do we even conceive of identity if it is always in process? What is at stake in the debates surrounding identity? Who gets to determine what counts as Southern and what doesn't and who has the cultural capital to eventually change the criteria? How do other regional identities operate similarly or differently to Southern? How do parallel changes in gender, racial, sexual, or class mores influence the production of a Southern regional identity? How might we start to speak of identity as something never truly fixed, as something continually constituted in relation to the changing landscape of social change? What are the political ramifications of such a reassessment of Southern identificatory practice?

In the same 2002 article in *American Heritage* magazine that includes the photograph of the Dixie Chicks, Zeitz suggests that the real reason for the “dixification” of the country is that native Southerners have taken “their culture, their music, and their religion” with them to other parts of the country (55). The proliferation of Southern identities outside of the traditional Southern region directly reflects the increased flow of information and images facilitated by mass media and communication technologies as well as shifting population patterns. Moreover, the late twentieth century and early twenty first saw the emergence of the South in the national political arena – literally setting the agenda for the rest of the nation. Picking up where Jimmy Carter left off, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush ushered in four straight terms of an identified Southerner in the highest office in the land. At one point during the Clinton presidency, the first three people in the line of succession were born in the South (Gore, Gingrich, and Arme).

Newt Gingrich also cemented and ultimately implemented the so-called conservative revolution starting with the Republican Party gaining control of congress in 1994.

Just as Howard Zinn configured the South as a mirror for the rest of the nation, many contemporary scholars continue to position the South as a place of great importance to the rest of the nation – a symbolic template full of lessons and stories. As Peter Applebome concludes in *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture*, the South “has been the lightning rod for our fondest hopes and worst fears – a shadow theater for national guilt – a place to stow the bloody rags we didn’t want to see; a scapegoat for our worst feelings; a model of an imagined perfect past; a hypothesis for a nation redeemed or a nation damned” (344). Applebome again configures the region in terms of its impact on the rest of the nation, heralding it as a generator of myth and not just a mere ocular vessel for the rest of the nation. The South is not a passive mirror, as Zinn suggests, simply present for the rest of the country to see its own reflections. The South is active, constantly cutting, reshaping, and shattering its image. Moreover, those who look at it are not passive bystanders – they are actively constructing their own identities based upon the constantly changing image they see. Perhaps a better metaphor to describe the South would be a theatrical one – like the “pageant” Applebome suggests – that allows for an interaction between the performer and the audience. Such a setup might foster a Southern identity of the future that, according to James C. Cobb in *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, will “reflect not just what Southerners themselves have chosen to make it but what other Americans need or want it to be as well” (339). Perhaps these future mythologies and identities will move beyond “past stereotype and caricature” and “face up to the

monumental challenge of transforming the divisive burden of Southern history into the common bedrock of a new regional identity on which all Southerners, regardless of race” and class “are free to build” (Present States 145). The theatrical space, both literal and metaphorical, allows for dialogue that might allow for the creation of such new Southern myths and identities. Through embodiment and the dramatization of process, theatrical experience foregrounds myth and its potential to reveal “hopes as well as strategies” for the future of the South. *Southern Living* publisher Emory Cunningham states, that “the future is not a destination, but rather a process, a becoming. The future never really arrives, but it is always there on the mind. A way of thinking really” (qtd. in Smith 134). Theatre provides the location for this thinking to occur.

I vividly remember a field trip my class took in the sixth grade to the Alliance Theatre in downtown Atlanta. As we drove down interstate 75, I remember being excited at the prospect of leaving the suburbs to explore the big city a mere twenty minutes from my home. My class was attending the play *South Cross* by John Klein, a dramatic amalgamation of Southern history using such lively characters as Elvis Presley and his manager, Martin Luther King Jr., and General Tecumseh Sherman to tell a tale of Southern history. I was fascinated by the spectacle of the whole experience: the platforms that jutted out from either side of the stage, the shower of spit that cascaded on me and my friends in the front row every time Elvis spoke, the play’s overlapping of historical periods, and the expansive feeling of the theatre space. Historical periods intertwined and themes emerged and dissipated. Had I know then what I know now, I would have praised it for its performance of how we write history. It wasn’t until after I left the theatre that day that I understood what I had experienced. I had seen a literal

congregation of Southern identities onstage, fighting amongst themselves to get included in the narratives of Southern history and myth. I felt compelled by my realization to figure out my own place within this grand story.

Upon returning home, my mom sat me down to question me about the event informing me that the principal of the middle school had just sent a note out to all parents apologizing for taking the students to the performance. Evidently the play had contained a fair amount of harsh, colorful language and sexual innuendo unbeknownst to me or most of my classmates. The version of the South presented onstage was not in compliance with the version of the sanitized, safe version presented at my school. It was one of the first times I can remember feeling that Southern identity and its exploration was perhaps a bad thing, something reserved for adults. I felt limitations being imposed and battles and voices being silenced. How am I supposed to figure out where I fit into this story if the story itself is off limits? But that danger only increased my curiosity. The images of these historical figures embodied onstage remained in my memory long after the performance. I held on to those images and can still picture the actor portraying Elvis, swiveling his hips and expectorating all over the front row. Just as Elvis's pelvis had done in the nineteen fifties, I recognized the power of theatre not only to contribute to and stage conversations over Southern identity but also its ability to incite fear. The nagging curiosity sparked on that day continues to propel me to chart Southern identity formation in the theatre and beyond.

As I sat in the audience of the Dixie Chick's latest tour in support of "Taking the Long Way," which stopped in Austin last December, I thought about my own relationship to Southern identity. Though I was not compelled by the audiences of my

day-to-day life to abandon my Southern identity, I questioned what it meant in the current political climate to refer to oneself by that regional marker. I was struck again by the danger involved in identity formation, as I looked down my row at the friends with whom I had come. All of us claim a certain Southern identification but how that plays out in our everyday lives differs radically. Turning back to the Dixie Chick's performing on stage, I determined that even though the band reconfigured their image their Southern identities were still present in their performance, written on their bodies and in the ways they played their instruments and styled their voices. I was not willing to let go of their Southern identities for to do so meant that one day I might have to relinquish mine.

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VITA

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