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Making a Case for Melodrama

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In the last few years long-running and often impassioned discussions on H-South suggest that many historians are interested in using film and other visual media to teach history courses. Yet those threads also suggest that, especially when the subject is race, there is very little agreement about what visual media can or should be used to set students thinking about racial issues and Southern history in productive and critical ways. Linda Williams, a Professor of Film Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley has produced a work that is extremely valuable to historians who wish to enhance the sophistication of their own thinking about teaching with film and other visual media.

Williams' analyses of such controversial films as *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* provide model examples of how creative media analysis can be incorporated fruitfully and seamlessly into syllabi and lectures in courses on race and Southern history. In the process, Williams goes well beyond the simplistic criterion of trying to determine if an author, film, or filmmaker is 'racist,' and therefore not worthy of inclusion in classroom teach-

ing.

Williams, who is probably best known for her book *Hard Core*, an analysis of the role pornography plays in modern culture, wrestles with equally complex and controversial subject matter here. In the course of the book's seven chapters, the author systematically dissects, and connects a whole range of works including novels, stage plays, films, television productions, and media events in order to press her argument about the role melodrama plays in forging the stories Americans tell themselves and each other about race. According to Williams, "playing the race card" is an integral way in which aggrieved or oppressed groups in America have gained rights or at least public sympathy "through [widespread public] recognition of injury" (4).

Melodrama is a problematic category, and most of us tend to think of it as an embarrassing and antiquated dramatic form. In contrast, Williams argues that melodrama has been "the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans" (44). Although the

author outlines five characteristics that help to define melodrama, perhaps the most important is her observation that “melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue” or villainy. This “recognition of virtue” is the thematic key that explains melodrama’s power to shape and change the nation’s thinking about racial victims and villains in ways that have influenced American society far beyond the boundaries of the novel’s page, the silver screen, or the television set (29).

Williams begins to demonstrate how by focusing on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the myriad stage and film versions that followed publication of the novel in 1852. Although the stage interpretations varied widely, the author demonstrates that in all its incarnations, images, especially the image of the brutally abused and beaten Uncle Tom, helped to confront and ultimately alter deeply held racial beliefs and attitudes among large numbers of Americans. Williams quotes Stowe who explained that even though the earliest edition of the novel had no illustrations, she saw herself as a painter. In a letter to her editor she wrote, “there is no arguing with pictures and everyone is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not” (50).

If everyone was impressed by pictures, it was the image of Stowe’s Christ-like Uncle Tom being beaten by the cruel Simon Legree that resonated most powerfully for antebellum audiences. According to Williams, the power of this image, like that of Stowe’s novel itself, “were direct results of their historically unprecedented recognition of the humanity of slaves” (65). The author clarifies this point by suggesting that sympathy for Uncle Tom was “created through the equation of black suffering with the more conventionalized and familiar suffering of innocent (white) children that was already a convention of Victorian sentimental fiction and melodrama,” in this case, the suffering of Little Eva (148).

Of course, Stowe was not the first writer to take as her subject the humanity of slaves. Nor was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the only racial melodrama that became a widely successful stage play in the nineteenth century. One thinks, for instance, of Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*. Yet Williams does make a respectable case for setting *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* apart from similarly-themed and successful dramas by stressing its widespread impact on late-nineteenth century American culture. In fact, she calls this chapter “A Wonderful ‘Leaping Fish’” in homage to Henry James’ description of the novel and its “almost unfathomable popularity and ubiquity” in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries

(45).

Williams also demonstrates that the powerful word-pictures found in Stowe’s novel, and their widely popular yet surprisingly divergent dramatizations, incited a revolution in the way antebellum Americans (in the Northern states at any rate) thought about African-American slaves and slavery. By the mid-1850s, widespread dramatic “performances of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had become a crucial dimension of the public debate about slavery, carried out on the stage as a tug-of-war between melodramatic pathos and comic minstrelsy” (84). The author’s argument is too densely detailed to be satisfactorily summarized here, but any reader interested in a brilliant and nuanced analysis of the novel, its dramatic offspring, and their place in American culture will find it here.

Although “Tom shows” as they came to be known, continued to mutate and enjoy popularity until the early-twentieth century, as film came to replace the stage show in popularity, so did an inverted version of Stowe’s story. This one derived its power not from the pathos of a brutalized Uncle Tom but from the starkly different dramas set on paper by Thomas Dixon and transferred to film by D.W. Griffith. Uncle Tom, as an iconic character of black male humanity derived through righteous suffering, became, in the works of Dixon and Griffith, the cunning and bestial black male, bent on criminality and, most of all, the rape of white women. If, as Williams argues, Stowe’s novel spearheaded a revolution in racial thinking in the antebellum period, Dixon and Griffith created works that carried out the counterrevolution. [1]

Williams enumerates the many similarities between Stowe’s novel and Griffith’s first blockbuster film *Birth of a Nation*. “Both were heralded as the first native-born triumphs of their respective media, the first immensely popular works to treat distinctly American themes and problems. Both brought an unprecedented length and legitimacy to their respective media and both generated racial controversies that altered the way white Americans felt about blacks, and how they felt about being white” (98).

Using both modern and period commentary and film critique, Williams agrees with many other writers who suggest that Griffith’s powerful film “helped forge a new sense of national solidarity and identity. . . out of the sexual threats of black villains toward defenseless white women” (99). Occasionally, however, Williams seems to overreach in pressing her argument. For instance, she notes that both Stowe’s novel and Griffith’s film “succeeded in moving unprecedentedly large numbers of the

American public to feel implicated in the trials and tribulations of groups whose virtue forged through suffering had not previously been recognized by the mass audience: African-American slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and white women in *The Birth of a Nation*" (99). Many historians are likely to question the primacy Williams attributes to Stowe's novel and Griffith's film. After all, in the case of the latter, the nation had been experiencing a "white slave" panic which resulted in passage of the Mann Act in 1910, four years before Griffith's epic came to the screen.

In fact, historians are likely to notice a number of instances in which Williams' arguments could be improved with some historical or chronological fine-tuning. This reader, for instance, was troubled by the periodization Williams suggests for antebellum theater reform, and the timing she suggests for widespread changes in cultural attitudes toward African-American men, the white slave panic, and the origins of legislation aimed at miscegenation and cross-racial concubinage. Yet, in the end, my cavils were overshadowed by the power of the larger argument and the author's erudition – especially in demonstrating the central place melodrama has played in the continuously evolving cultural discussion about race in America.

For instance, instead of simply pointing out the apparent racism in Dixon's novels and Griffith's film, Williams plumbs them for meaning, connecting both to a long history of similarly sentimental and maudlin but no less effective and evocative group of novels, plays, and films dealing with race in America. In the process, Williams provides a way past the obvious obstacle of Griffith's and the film's racism and, more productively, finds a constructive and instructive way to use these and similar media presentations as heuristic devices.

In Chapter Four, the author turns her attention to *The Jazz Singer* and *Show Boat*. Both the film and stage show are well-known to film and theater critics for their technical and substantive achievements: *The Jazz Singer* because it was the first sound film, and *Show Boat* because its sometimes weighty subject matter was a "distinctive departure from the frivolity of all previous musicals and the first significant movement toward a new 'realistic' integration of song, story, and racial theme that is now the norm for modern musical theater" (160). But, from Williams' perspective, the two melodramas are important for yet another reason. For in both, the hero and heroine find that "posing as black is ultimately a way to pass as white" (141).

Of course, pointing out the expropriation of African-

American cultural forms by actors and auteurs is not a novel insight. But, in Williams' hands, this familiar process is given new meaning. For just as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evoked new mass sympathy for the nation's enslaved, "[t]he Jazz Singer's achievement was to take another group unfamiliar to dominant mass culture as objects of sympathy - recently emigrated, rapidly assimilating Jews - and to ennoble their travails of assimilation through association with the by now thoroughly conventionalized afflictions of slaves" (148).

Echoing Jolson's appropriation of blackface, *Show Boat's* melodramatic recognition of virtue is primarily accomplished by a white character whose success as a performer is due to her expropriation not only of blackface, but also of a "black melos associated with the afflictions of slaves" (161). The authors discussion of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man of Mine" is especially evocative, as she traces the many ways in which songs mark the singer racially and, in the process, allow whites to appropriate the sympathy evoked by the suffering of slaves. This chapter, in particular, can be read very fruitfully alongside the relatively new whiteness studies. [2]

Of course, no discussion of racial melodrama would be complete without considering *Gone With the Wind*, and here again Williams is astute in analyzing both Mitchell's novel and Selznick's film in ways that should prove especially useful to many H-South subscribers. Williams provides many of the facts and figures about the novel and film's popularity that proved elusive in the recent H-South discussion on this topic. There are also other priceless anecdotes and readings of and reactions to the film from persons on both sides of the color line. But Williams' central argument is that *Gone With the Wind* was and remains so popular because it links and seems to resolve "two contradictory nostalgias: an overt nostalgia for the aristocratic, agrarian ways of the "old South" and a more covert nostalgia for the strength, virtue, and endurance of oppressed races (Irish and black)" (214).

Alex Haley's book and ABC's television event, *Roots* are the subjects of the sixth chapter. Here, Williams not only ties the novel and the mini-series to her larger melodramatic framework, but she convincingly argues for the singular role *Roots* played in the process she delineates. In particular, she reminds readers that it was the nation's first post-Civil Rights melodrama of race, and thus, not surprisingly, one of the first since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to place African-Americans heroes and heroines at the center of its narrative. Williams writes that "what *Roots* did for its African-American readers and viewers is thus

not unlike what blackface and a song about 'Mammy' in *The Jazz Singer* did for Jews: It offered identification with an exoticized (Afro-centric) blackness, ennobled through suffering, whose actual purpose, however, was ultimately to forge an assimilated identity" (230). One may not agree with the author's conclusions, but, as with all the other chapters, the reading and argumentation are sometimes surprising and always exhilarating.

The only thing that interferes with the prose is an occasional indulgence in distracting theoretical jargon. In one case, for instance, Williams writes that "Haley finds himself nominated (in Peter Brooks's sense) and interpellated (in Althusser and Fanon's sense) by the name-of-the-father (Lacan's sense) that slavery had stolen from him" (224). Such lapses, though few in number, are unnecessary forays into critique-speak, and they mar a text that mostly manages to convey very complex ideas through solid, straightforward prose.

Williams' final chapter is likely to be the most problematic for historians. Not just because the events she focuses on are so recent, but because it is difficult to argue for even a rough equivalence between literary and media creations on the one hand and actual historical events portrayed by the media on the other. Thus, as she tries to fit the Rodney King and O.J. Simpson trials into her larger argument, I found myself resisting her argument, or at least not feeling as convinced as I had by the other chapters. That said, just as she does in the rest of the book, Williams makes a strong case for the ways in which televised coverage of both trials and the events surrounding them, were so powerful because they were as much melodramatic presentations as they were news stories. Although there is very little that has been produced to date on the O.J. Simpson trial that is worth reading, this is one of the first insightful treatments of the trial's larger meanings with which I am acquainted.

As she concludes, Williams suggests that melodrama continues to provide a way for Americans to talk about, assimilate and respond to subjects about which they are not able or are not supposed to speak. After all, now

that we supposedly "live in an achieved era of equal rights for all, race has joined the category of the officially inexpressible. Mentioning it is considered in bad taste, a cynical ploy, 'playing the race card'" (300). Yet Williams demonstrates throughout this book that race is and has been at the vital center of American life and cultural expression since the antebellum period, and that the mass public's fascination with the topic is demonstrable through the wide public appeal of and response to the racial melodramas she so artfully explores.

In her capable rendering, melodrama provides a key "to understanding the ways in which American mass culture 'talks to itself' about the relations between race and gender. It is through the Manichean logic of good and evil and victim and villain that melodrama recognizes virtue, expresses the inexpressible, and reconciles the irreconcilables of American culture" (299). Although historians will no doubt find much with which to disagree, I believe the author succeeds at what she sets out to do. In such a large, sweeping, and ambitious book as this, that is high praise indeed.

Notes

[1]. According to Williams, Thomas Dixon's novels were written in part as self-conscious responses to Stowe's work. See Thomas Dixon. *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (New York: Doubleday, 1903); and *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970. Originally published 1905).

[2]. Two examples of the "whiteness" studies to which I refer are Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South* (New York: Pantheon, 1998) and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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