

Scott Pett
Graduate Student, Department of English
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Confronting Thomas Dixon in the Fondren Library

When my dissertation advisor, Prof. José Aranda, first told me he thinks one of my chapters should analyze Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s "The Clansman: An American Drama" (1905), I recoiled in horror. Without even having to read the play, I knew it was the quintessence of white supremacist literature, and I had no desire to immerse myself in the racist iconographies and belligerent vocabularies of the text directly responsible for the 1920s revival of the KKK. I have a strong relationship with Prof. Aranda, and trust him completely. This was the first time I had ever resisted his vision for my project, which at that point was still in its embryonic stage. After talking with him about my feelings toward the text, he helped me re-learn a key principle of literary criticism: you do not have to agree with, enjoy, or appreciate a text for it to merit critical scrutiny. Through my conversations with Prof. Aranda, I began to see how confronting Dixon not only pertains to the current socio-political climate, it would also force me as a white scholar of American literary history to consider more carefully the ethical stakes of humanist knowledge production and consumption, and avoid the pursuit of easy answers.

The resources at Fondren Library have played a crucial role in facilitating my engagement with Dixon. I began writing the paper in Spring 2016 as part of my comprehensive exams. Through a simple search on the Fondren Classic Catalog, I procured a copy of the play. To help digest the text and direct my focus from a range of questions to a single topic and ultimately a debatable thesis, I then spent a few weeks perusing several stacks of books in the library: from critical theories of race and regional histories of the post-war Reconstruction period to Dixon biography and the political science of populist nationalism. During this time, I

borrowed several books through Interlibrary Loan (ILL), made many retrieval requests from the Library Service Center (LSC), and even suggested a few books for purchase (much thanks to Joe Goetz for all his work). The dozens of scholarly studies to which the library allowed me access was immensely helpful for developing a critical vocabulary and methodological approach to “The Clansman.” I began to see how I might engage the text through the theoretical paradigms of citizenship and whiteness. But because my dissertation project deals in large part with literary texts that have had a significant social impact, I then had to learn about the reception history of the play, which no book or essay that I could find had covered in depth.

For this part of the process, I made extensive use of Fondren’s online databases, especially those that catalog digital copies of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century US periodicals: *African American Communities*, *American Antiquarian Society Historical Periodicals Collection*, *America’s Historical Imprints*, *American Periodical Series*, *Historical African-American Newspapers*, *New York Times (Historic)*, and *Periodicals Archive Online (PAO)*, among others. Through countless basic and Boolean searches in these archives, I gathered close to one hundred newspaper clippings that describe and debate both the moral character of Thomas Dixon’s play and the impassioned audiences that attended and/or protested it. Through these periodicals, I also learned more about the movements and geographies of resistance to Dixon and his ilk, which were steered for the most part by black intellectuals like Kelly Miller, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. DuBois. Through the reports, op-eds, and even poems about Dixon as a persona and playwright that I could download as PDF files, I not only became more familiar with the heatedness and pervasiveness of the debate surrounding the play, I began to piece together a more comprehensive history of its circulation. I could see it and Dixon move (or not, if it was banned) from up and down the eastern US all the way to places like

Japan and Australia. In terms of learning about the effect the play had on people's thinking, especially in regards to the civic agency and mobility of black men in America, these databases were incredibly valuable.

Without the resources at Fondren Library, I would not be able to do the work that I now believe is more important than ever. I still have a long way to go on the paper, perhaps especially in finessing the language I use to position and engage the text in more sensitive ways. Going forward, I will continue to depend on and benefit from Fondren Library as I build on my reading of Dixon with other works that deal with similar themes, and as I put this chapter into conversation with the others that will shape my dissertation.