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ABSTRACT

“Scraps of Paper”:
 The Paradoxes of Civic Print in Thomas Dixon’s “The Clansman”

Civic print culture in the United States has long been contested terrain for regulating and systematizing the nation’s hierarchies of belonging. Arguably, in no other literary work are citizenship papers more urgently used as props for exploring, justifying, and fusing together the anti-black logics of segregation and disenfranchisement than in Thomas Dixon’s “civil-racial” morality play “The Clansman: An American Drama” (1905). This essay reads the “scraps of [civic] paper” that circulate through Dixon’s play for the anxieties they are supposed to justify about black political mobility and the paradoxes that culminate in the paramilitary formation of the Ku Klux Klan. In purporting to demonstrate the incompatibility of black citizenship with the white home, Dixon helps us see more clearly the irrational populist affects that incite phenomena like the Obama birther conspiracy and Donald Trump’s more recent allegations of election-rigging.

PAPER

“Scraps of Paper”:
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As proponents of the “birther” conspiracy theory that challenged the legitimacy of Barack Obama’s Hawaiian birth certificate remind us, US civic print systems play a crucial role in the construction of American membership politics. Post-WWI social discourse in Europe and the US tends to associate “citizenship papers” with debates about immigration: visas, green cards, passports, naturalization forms, etc. Under the umbrella of its presumed inviolability, we use such civic documentation as a socio-political index, speaking about those who immigrate without papers as “illegal,” “undocumented,” and “alien.” Of course, in addition to arranging the

landscape of American civic life, such words and the articles to which they refer typically double as shields of perceived impartiality behind which government and citizenry can demonize and displace the ostensibly dangerous demographics du jour: those groups seen at any given moment as placing a burden on or posing a threat to the “quintessentially American” institutions of democracy and suburban serenity. As scholars of immigration and ethnic histories have shown, these labels and their attendant “hypernationalist” insistence on paper have a tendency to racialize and dehumanize as much as to act as rhetorical and material gatekeepers of civic agency.¹

But as the Obama birtherism effort demonstrates, immigration is hardly the only social contest marked by a continuous, wide-spread appeal to the authority of US civic print systems. These systems have played an especially central role in the centuries-long campaign for black (non)belonging in the United States and in facilitating the advancement of white America’s identity crises. The demand that Obama turn over his birth certificate to the American people, suffusing the first three years of his inaugural term, highlights and rejuvenates a cultural and legal legacy not only of black marginalization, both psychic and material; it also re-marks Anglo-Protestant nationhood as “an achievement, not a timeless essence, but a tenuous contingency.”² That is to say, the invocation of civic papers to guard (white) America from a supposedly sinister “black” citizenship signals more than the fragility of whiteness as America’s normative subject position; it simultaneously, and paradoxically, both undermines and reinforces the assumed sacrosanctity of civic print culture that is ostensibly at stake.

¹ Mae Ngai marks WWI as the birth of modern citizenship papers in the context of immigration, predating the Johnson-Reed National Origins Act of 1924. “Rigid border controls, passports, and state restrictions on entry and exit became the norms for governing emigration and immigration. It was... a new, ‘hypernationalist’ regime of immigration restriction. When Congress legislated restriction in the United States, with its emphasis on territoriality, border control, and documents, it acted as part of this global trend” (10).

² Romine 145.

This chapter approaches citizenship papers broadly as a site for contesting and materializing, in the imagination of its author (the white, gender-normative Republic), the nation's hierarchies of belonging. By including the ballot and Constitution as much as those documents that function as markers of an individual's constitutional standing (from birth certificates and visas to property deeds and marriage licenses), I aim partly to think on a macro level about the culture of US civic print as a flexible force that facilitates the discursive kinesis between democracy and domesticity, or between the nation and home. Additionally, as the currency of political and social mobility, citizenship papers tend to function as a device with which to construct populist fantasies of apocalypse. It is largely here, in the paper performatives of security, identity, and community, that citizenship discourse traffics in the affects of demographic terror and instability. In terms of the work they do as vehicles for populist panic, I am interested in the ideological status of citizenship papers as sacred objects. Or rather, I am interested in the ways in which civic print is invoked in cultural discourse; but more importantly, I want to study the ways in which civic print is dismissed, whenever it fails to serve the author's interests, as insignificant.

Arguably, in no other literary text is the equivalence of civic paper with the conjoined fates of American democracy and domesticity more aggressively iterated than in Thomas Dixon Jr.'s "The Clansman: An American Drama" (1905). Perhaps the quintessence of white supremacist literature, "The Clansman" reinforces an historically persistent representation of black inferiority where illiteracy, emasculation, malice, and licentiousness converge as validations for slavery, forcible deportation, and later Jim Crow. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, "The Clansman" is one of the most socially significant texts in American literary history, not only because it eventually reached audiences as far as Japan and Australia, but because it

proudly parades the fluidities of whiteness and reveals the crucial part civic print plays in its preservation. Myriad civic and quasi-civic documents circulate over the course of the play: among them a fraudulent land deed, a compulsory marriage license, and provocative proclamations of state-enforced miscegenation and martial law. I use “civic print” to refer to them collectively because each document, while different in scale and intent, aims to do two things simultaneously: first, to contest civic documents as incapable of authorizing and protecting the political mobility of black Americans; and second, paradoxically, to demonstrate that the political mobility of black Americans will undermine the sacredness of those very documents. To navigate such paradoxes, Dixon and his sympathetic audience depend on the legitimacy of emotion; facts and logic, or Dixon’s version of them, do not harmonize with the pursuit for black equality.

Set during the early days of Reconstruction, the play fantasizes the onset of a racial apocalypse brought to bear by the impending accessibility of civic print – especially the ballot – to black Americans. In this essay, I am most interested in the maneuvers made by the father/son protagonists Dr. Richard and Ben Cameron (the eponymous Clansman) to “save” US civic print systems from the enfranchisement of black men by paradoxically deprecating those very systems as a vehicle for making enfranchisement possible. In one of the countless scenes that betray Dixon’s utter lack of aesthetic or political depth, the young character Flora asks her father Dr. Cameron about the anxieties she detects in her family regarding the state election that drives the action of the play,

Flora: (*Poutingly*) Why did brother Bennie tell me to stay close to the house today?

Dr. Cameron: On account of this election.

Flora: Who’s afraid of an election?

Dr. Cameron: There was never one like this –

Flora: What are they going to do they never did before?

Dr. Cameron: I'll tell you, baby – they are going to try to make water run up hill, turn black into white, an animal into a king, with a little scrap of paper, called a ballot.

Poor writer though he is, Dixon is able in this one passage to elate fear and elegize rationality as he sees it, and draw a straight, threatening line from the ballot to white femininity, represented here by the innocent young Flora. For the Cameron family (note the playwright's transparent allegory for "American"), the status of US democracy and domesticity converge on the rhetorical and ideological standing of the ballot as either a scrap or socially legitimate piece of paper.

Considering their ability to incite civic and domestic panics, both on stage and among the sympathizers of Dixon's audience, these are some paradoxically formidable scraps of paper. In this essay, I follow Jennie A. Kassanoff in arguing that "the ballot is as much a text to be interpreted as a straw to be counted"; or, at least, to be counted in theory.³ "The Clansman" locates the ideological disintegration of whiteness in the question of which civic papers "count" and when and why. Their status is always in flux, depending on how they best serve the interests of white supremacy. Through the Cameron family and the emancipated servants that remain loyal to the status quo throughout the crisis and panic of Reconstructed whiteness, Dixon uses what he sees as the plight of US civic print as a device to inspire, justify, and negotiate the rise of the Ku Klux Klan as a presumably last-resort paramilitary force beholden to the very systems of print it aims to preserve. In an essay explaining why he adapted the novels for which he is most infamous for stage production, Thomas Dixon, Jr. predicts that "within fifty years" of the play's publication, unless the nation adopts as official policy the colonization plan promoted by both Jefferson and Lincoln, there will be a "civil-racial war, the most horrible and cruel that ever blackened the annals of the world."⁴

³ Kassanoff 576.

⁴ Dixon 1906, 142.

It is through the metaphorical “blackening” of the world’s historical trajectory (and, significantly, the papers that record and immortalize that trajectory) that Dixon, presumably in pursuit of “civil-racial” law and order, frames his portentous panorama of domestic and democratic ruin, and romanticizes the KKK origin story. The “civil-racial” apocalypse begins with what Dixon portrays as the dual perils of nation and home, as we see in the lesson young Flora learns from her father. Soon after their exchange, three antagonistic black(faced) characters foretell that the election will enable South Carolina, under their governance, to “summon the posse comitatus and search any house,” especially “the fairest houses where the fairest of the fair dwell” (for what nefarious purposes, they leave to the audience’s imagination), as well as to control commerce through “smoke houses and hen houses... and stores and banks.” “We show ‘em we’re free,” the voyeuristic Gus promises. Later in the play, Gus sends Flora over a cliff to her death after attempting to rape her. “We show ‘em what we can do, pardner. Des wait.”⁵

With “The Clansman,” Dixon aestheticized and revitalized a postbellum panic that had never really gone away regarding the black incursion of White Houses and a regard for black politics as the defacement of democracy. From the very beginning of its tour in September 1905, “The Clansman” aroused an array of impassioned responses, and it was from this angle, rather than from the play’s moral aesthetics, philosophical substance, or historical veracity, that the press directed its appraisals and Dixon constructed his sense of self as a populist artist. Public commentary focused instead on audience temperament, receptivity, and intelligence. ““The Clansman’ draws large crowds, of course,” writes one South Carolina editor:

[The play] is commended by many good, honest people, for there are, unfortunately, many good honest people who see and think superficially: it is also commended by those who have engaged in lynchings or who are “ready for a lynching party.” But thousands of

⁵ For more on the history of lynchings motivated by alleged rape of white women, see Crystal Feimster.

thoughtful men and women whose judgment is valuable condemn it in the most unqualified manner.⁶

By contrast, an unnamed writer for Mississippi's *The Biloxi Daily Herald* whose regard for "The Clansman" bordered on the religious considers "shallow-minded" those who do *not* commend the play. Even as he predicts that "the north will yet rise to thank us for this part in a struggle that meant so much for the future welfare of the whole country," he discourages "hysterical women and children," "the moral and intellectual coward," "those who prefer the distortions of history to the logic of truth," and "the ignorant negro" from attending. Those left to appreciate the play – the "us" of this writer's fantasy – are the ones Dixon valorizes as the nation's only hope: patriotic, predominantly Southern, white men. Predictably, the ideal audience for Dixon's play tends to mirror the play's image of an ideal US citizenry. Those who shared this Biloxi writer's vision of "The Clansman" as a revolutionary text aiming to make America great again were frequently of the belief that only through categorical exclusion would national unity be possible.⁷

So, Dixon cared deeply about white audience response, and was as energized by wild outbursts of enthusiasm during performances as he was by newspaper antagonism after them. As an early complainer of what today is so often dubbed "the liberal media" (what Dixon calls "the commercial scalawag press" and the Biloxi writer labels "the weak-kneed city press"), condemnation from journalists, which was by no means universal or even all that harsh, lined up with audience fervor in a way that helped Dixon see himself as an anti-elitist whose art was

⁶ This appears in a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* denouncing Dixon's claims that editor of *The State*, W. E. Gonzales, had organized a group of demonstrators to hiss at Dixon during the play and to later follow him to his hotel, where Dixon claims they "tried to provoke a fight in the presence of my wife." "The less said about such men as representatives of Southern opinion the better," Dixon concludes. "Such critics are always a man's best friend." The exchange between Dixon, Gonzales, and *The New York Times* played out in the following articles: "The Clansman' Hissed: South Carolina Audience Disapproves Mr. Dixon's Play." *The New York Times*. Oct 16, 1905; "The Clansman': Thomas Dixon, the Author, Tells How It Was Received." *The New York Times*. Oct 22, 1905; "The Clansman Denounced: South Carolina Editor Denies Charges Made by Thomas Dixon, Jr." *The New York Times*. Jan 2, 1906.

⁷ "The Clansman." *The Biloxi Daily Herald*. Nov 27, 1905. My italics.

doing the true work of Reconstruction.⁸ The “boisterous” reception the play received the night of its premiere at Liberty Theatre in New York substantiated Dixon’s feeling that “there is no longer a North and a South.”⁹ But the national unity discourse favored by Dixon was assembled from notions of “white manhood” that emerge as literary critic Dana Nelson describes: by “abstract[ing] men’s interests out of local issues and identities in an appeal to a nationally shared ‘nature.’”¹⁰ And news print exacerbated this process, even those that considered the play “a firebrand, a counsel of barbarity; in fact, a crime” meant to spread racial strife.¹¹ White nationhood and manhood, white home and Republic: to the extent that Dixon did unite North and South, he did so by aligning these values and spheres as isomorphic, both within the world of the play and in his public preoccupations with audience.

The play begins by circulating a series of distressing (to Dixon’s audience) pronouncements of black masculinity thwarting white: that “de Lawd call de cullud men ter come up on high” and “De judgemen’ day done come fur de white man!” That the two modes of masculinity are irreconcilable is a theme throughout the play. While “characteristic crowds of negroes” laugh, talk, shout, and drink in the background of Act 1, Dixon draws from a matrix of religious, political, and social idioms and imagery to establish the demerits – illiteracy, naiveté, and brutishness – of the population that has only recently (within the world of the play) been emancipated and enfranchised. In the opening sequence, we meet Alec, the officious soon-to-be Sheriff whose empowered ignorance, Dixon insinuates, threatens the fabric of American society. Alec and another character are examining a handbill with the image of a rat on it. Reading the flier upside down, Alec explains to his friend that there is a rat because they are “votin’ ter-day

⁸ See “Dixon on Race Problem: Says a New Ku-Klux Klan in the South is a Little Premature.” *The New York Times*. Nov 28, 1905.

⁹ “‘The Clansman’ Presented.” *The New York Times*. Jan 9, 1906.

¹⁰ Nelson 1998, 7.

¹¹ “Suppress ‘The Clansman!’” *The Washington Post*. Sep 26, 1906.

on de Constertooshun ter take de vote away fum de white man.” Confused, the friend asks about the meaning of the rat. Alec replies, “Dat means de ratification of de Constertooshun.” “I vote dat,” the friend responds.

As a baseline, this handbill – or rather what it represents for the two men reading it – suggests that those ideologically “white” papers that do not appear on stage but are referred to early in the play, the Constitution and the Bible, damn black citizenship more than those that circulate physically, perhaps even including a proclamation that imposes miscegenation as the law of the land. Later in Act 1, Alec misquotes “de good book”: “De Lawd moves in mischievous way, his blunders to perform.” It is partly here, in the venomous representation of blacks as politically and religiously illiterate, that Dixon locates and justifies white anxieties about and skepticism toward black papers as a vehicle for their uplift as social equals. Alec’s illiteracy, combined with his newly granted ability to “ratify” the Constitution, forebodes material consequences that will be equally harmful to everyone, white and black. With his vote, Alec will not be upholding the Constitution, he will be turning it into something else, something sneaky, dark, and virulent. Within the paternalistic tone of these scenes depicting religious and political simplicity resides Dixon’s defense against the accusation that he wrote “The Clansman” “to appeal to prejudice or assault the negro race.” Dixon claims to feel “for the negro... only the profoundest pity and kindest sympathy,” and wants to leave his white audience believing it too is benevolent, rather than prejudiced, for opposing male suffrage and intermarriage.¹² In some ways, it is Dixon’s gas-lighted coupling of “civil-racial” apocalypse and (white) nationalist unity that draws me to his play – considered by some at the time “the most talked of play ever

¹² Dixon 1906, 142.

produced in the United States” – more than the novels that inspired both it and D.W. Griffith’s infamous blockbuster *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).¹³

For Dixon, the charge of constitutional and biblical ignorance is reason enough to legislate black non-belonging; but he takes things one step further. As gullible characters like Alec reveal the grotesque logics that substantiate Dixon’s agenda, the audience is treated to the hypocrisies of “colored” democracy. Within the first few minutes of the play, Alec antagonizes Nelse (a mostly “comic” character loyal to their former master Dr. Cameron) for not voting “the right ticket” that ensures everyone who does so the illusory “forty acres an’ a mule.” Alec threatens Nelse with jail, violence, and community exclusion, telling him he “ain’t de right kin’ er n__.” With this altercation, Dixon hopes to expose the supposedly violent and despotic disposition of the black vote, and to demonstrate that “absolute equality,” even within the community seeking it, is a mirage. Equality is not only impossible, according to Dixon, but as Nelse communicates by punching the white Governor of South Carolina who tells him he is “the equal of any man who walks this earth,” it is being forced upon many who do not want it.

Finding drama to be the “much more powerful a form of expression,” and “the best medium” for putting the “tremendously vital [negro] question” to “the American people North and South.... the whole people,” Dixon considered himself a healer of “national” discord.¹⁴ This, of course, meant actively ignoring, dismissing, and mischaracterizing the resistance he faced from black Americans. Even though the play was driven out by the “colored citizens” of Boston and Philadelphia (Dixon even applied for a gun permit a month after the Liberty Theatre premiere upon receiving a “well written” death threat signed by “The Negro Ku Klux Gang”), his cognitive dissonance seems never to have waived. Dixon maintained that critics were

¹³ “Amusements: ‘The Clansman’s’ History.” *Olympia Daily Recorder*. Oct 9, 1908.

¹⁴ Dixon 1906, 139; 142.

“confined to the newspapers, and not apparent in the audience.”¹⁵ Black protests, death threat letters, a ubiquitous pamphlet/open letter to Dixon by the mathematician and intellectual Kelly Miller, and parody poems that imagine Dixon being denied access to heaven did not register as consequential.¹⁶ It was not even against the black press that Dixon responded so strongly as critics, but the white press. In refusing to acknowledge black activism and print cultures as substantial to the debates orbiting his work, Dixon betrayed the fantasy of the play’s central moral: that black civic engagement would mean the death of white agency and manhood; that it would tarnish the Constitution; that it would ignite an apocalyptic drama in the theatre of white domesticity.

Through Alec, Dixon’s target audience eagerly consumes another familiar trope of white superiority: black incapacity for self-governance. When a duplicitous carpetbag figure sells to Alec for ten dollars a sham deed to Dr. Cameron’s land, Alec counts out the money: “– 2 – 4 – 6 and 5 is ten.” Alec’s inability to count to ten jettisons for the audience any impression that most black men can envision, much less manage, the “forty acres” toward which they feel, to Dixon’s mind, a dangerous sense of entitlement. Again, with “comedic” bite, Dixon streamlines a long-standing logic for selective enfranchisement. Dixon is saying something like “those who cannot count, do not count,” but he also embodies the thinking Peter Coviello describes in *Intimacy in America* (2005). Coviello explains how “self-possession” preceded whiteness as the principal medium for determining civic standing. “The dependent person – the unpropertied laborer, the wife, the child, the slave – is... insufficiently self-possessed.” Thus, “[if] blackness describes an

¹⁵ See “Boston Citizens Drive ‘Clansman’ From City.” *Afro-American*. Jul 30, 1910; “[Clansman; South; Philadelphia; Clansman].” *The Savannah Tribune*. Oct 27, 1906; “Threat to Lynch Dixon: Author of ‘The Clansman’ Applies for a Pistol Permit.” *The New York Times*. Feb 4, 1906; “‘The Clansman’ Bouserously Received at the Columbia.” *The Washington Post*. Mar 6, 1906.

¹⁶ In fact, the previously cited *NYT* article suggests Dixon suspected Kelly Miller to be the author of the death threat letter. Kelly Miller, “As to the Leopard Spots.” In *Radicals and Conservatives, and Other Essays on the Negro in America* by Kelly Miller, edited by Phillip Rieft. New York: Schocken Books, 1968; J. C. McAdams, “St. Dixon at the Gate: A Parody.” *Afro-American*. Feb 23, 1907. See also Samuel Roberts.

innate failure to be self-possessed, then the free black citizen could not exist in America,” which is why, as Matthew Frye Jacobson argues, “free blacks, not enslaved blacks, represented the greater political anomaly.”¹⁷ Drawing from antebellum notions of property as “moral... insofar as it implies a specific kind of self-relation,” Dixon parodies what he and his audience see as the black man’s maladroitness for both land- and self-stewardship, and by extension his inaptness for American citizenship.¹⁸

Antebellum notions of selfhood, land, and civic print combine against Alec after he attempts to evict the Cameron family using that bogus deed. When Dr. Cameron warns that in participating in (the rigging of) the black election Alec has “started on a dangerous road,” Alec responds: “I take care myself, sah.” He then continues: “I got ter tell yer, Dr. Cameron, you git offen my lan’.” Dr. Cameron, in shock, takes the document from Alec, and reads the text aloud, making it clear the person who sold it did so in the spirit of Moses, “for the enlightenment of those who loved darkness.” By the end of the play, after the formation and deployment of the KKK, we see (from Dixon’s point of view) a wiser, successfully emasculated Alec. As Sheriff, he cannot bring himself to arrest Ben Cameron, the eponymous Clansman: “ef I walk er long side er him – he knock hell outen me.” Austin Stoneman, the treacherous white northerner who has groomed Alec to have “the courage to defend the equal rights of man,” demands of him: “have you forgotten your manhood?” Alec concedes to him, “Yassah! I furgit it.” Dixon of course wants his audience to deliberate whether blackness and manhood are actually compatible. Alec then abdicates the office of Sheriff (saying “I wants peace”), and announces his plan to go “back ter farmin’” for the Cameron family. In doing so, Alec authenticates antebellum

¹⁷ Coviello 33-4. Jacobson 28, also qtd in Coviello.

¹⁸ Coviello 31.

associations between property and ownership (rather than workmanship), masculinity, whiteness, and the civic franchise.

What Dixon also conveys in this scene is that Alec is returning home: that the black home is in reality the white home – or more specifically, the southern white home. Alec’s epiphany about the black home being the white home eschews charges against slavery being a harmful institution and against former slave masters being violent wrongdoers. It also diverts the audience’s attention from this line of questioning by shining a light on the hypocrisies of northern liberalism. As Flora’s “Mammy” Eve explains when asked if she loves Elsie (Stoneman’s daughter and Ben Cameron’s paramour), “Yankee folks talks mighty fine honey, but I’m skeered dey doan lub n__s.” Because of emancipation and post-war property taxes being used to finance black social reform, the family at the center of the play is facing hard times. The poverty-stricken, but honest and philanthropic Camerons have had to “turn [their] home into a boarding house.” Their house is no longer their own. For those whom Dixon means to anger by this, the Cameron plight becomes all the more feeling when former slaves grieve the crisis. In Act 2 of the play, on learning the Cameron house is to be forcibly auctioned for back-taxes, Eve echoes Dr. Cameron in his chat with Flora regarding the ballot as a “scrap of paper.” She blames the new government for upending traditional hierarchies of belonging, for “bustin’ up de whole creation.”

But this sentiment of the black home being the white home simultaneously masks and boosts a hidden, arguably more incendiary purpose than to assure Dixon’s audience that black Americans were better off enslaved than they are emancipated and enfranchised. Through the practice legal historian Robin Lenhardt calls “marriage regulation,” the curation of black domesticity into the image of white domesticity actually becomes a celebratory means of

diminishing black citizenship. As part of the project to control post-emancipation black life, the Freedman's Bureau formalized (sometimes at gunpoint) slave marriages that the state had previously not deemed legitimate. Solemnizing slave marriages was not, Lenhardt demonstrates, a progressive reform that established an "unfettered black citizenship," but was rather part of the program aiming "to create... the 'right' kind of black citizens, productive, sexually compliant, gender conforming, and, of course, married."¹⁹ "Indeed," Lenhardt writes, "with slavery eliminated, marriage became a critical path to erecting something approximating the master-servant relationship that had previously existed – its power configuration as well as its color distinctions."²⁰

"The Clansman" represents this process of marriage regulation through the ostensibly comic marriage license sub-plot between Nelse and Eve. In Act 2, Nelse has Dr. Cameron read him a letter from the Freedman's Bureau. The letter informs Nelse "that you must get a license – and be married again under the new laws, or cease to live with Eve as your wife." Dr. Cameron explains that Nelse and Eve are "morally, but not legally" married. Nelse comes up with a plan to prank Eve. Feeling empowered with a new white marriage license in his pocket, he decides to pretend to Eve that he will be pursuing other women with the hopes of humbling her. He wants Eve to beg him to re-marry her. Of course, his plan backfires. Nelse overplays his hand, and Eve turns his plan around on him. Nelse spends the rest of the play pursuing Eve, working to convince her to marry him, which she eventually agrees to do. In Nelse's final attempt to win Eve back, he delivers her a note through Flora.

Flora: (*Opens note and reads*) Mistah Nelson presents his compliments to Miss Eve, and so – solicits the pleasure of her company.

Eve: (*Laughing softly*) Dat soun' fine, doan it?

¹⁹ Lenhardt 112.

²⁰ Lenhardt 111.

Flora: Such big words for Nelse.

Eve: (*Rising*) Yas – Marse Ben write dat. Tell [Nelse] to come on.

Having been written and delivered by white hands, Nelse's note is deemed legitimate, and, in a way, so in this moment is his path to an accredited union with Eve. Unlike the marriage license, the note is not a legal document; but it nevertheless symbolically facilitates for this couple a crucial moment in the formation of their post-Reconstruction blackness and civic station. It is also undoubtedly another moment Dixon would point to as proof of his non-prejudice.

As big a role as Alec and Nelse play in Dixon's argument against black civic life in America, Dixon wants the audience to know the difficulty, for him, is not truly a matter of ignorance or education. Again, it is through civic print that Dixon makes clear the imagined dangers of both ignorance and intelligence. It turns out that, unlike in the novel *The Clansman*, Gus, who kills Flora, is not the principal antagonist. More so than with Alec and Nelse, through whom Dixon shows what black men *cannot* accomplish with paper on the civil stage, it is through the play's central villain Silas Lynch, an educated man, that Dixon shows what black men *can* accomplish (to the detriment of the white Republic and home). Apart from the ballot (and more implicitly the Bible and Constitution), it is the papers that pass through Lynch, who becomes Lieutenant Governor after the election, that bear the most overtly sobering weight for Dixon's sympathetic audience: in order, a proclamation of state-enforced intermarriage, a power-of-attorney making Lynch acting Governor, and finally a declaration of martial law that allows Stoneman and Lynch to suspend the writ of habeas corpus.

Where the rat flier, fraudulent land deed, marriage license, and Nelse's vicarious love note divulge the supposed ludicrousness and dangerous impracticality of an autonomous black citizenship, Lynch's role in the play (even more so than that of the femicidal Gus) is to reveal and implement the larger apocalyptic racial agenda. Halfway through Act 1, Stoneman asks

Lynch, “Have you posted the proclamation of the Commanding General on the intermarriage of blacks and whites?” Lynch explains he has not because “the marriage of blacks to whites is a dangerous subject in the South.” Rather than wait for news of the election, Stoneman wants “these people [to] know... that a new era has dawned – the reign of equality on every inch of our soil – absolute equality.” Still, Lynch deems it “a daring act” to post the proclamation which “dares to repeal laws these people hold more sacred than life.” Stoneman takes it from him, and Lynch directs him to the bulletin board of the Cameron House, where “it will meet all eyes.” Posting the paper, Stoneman promises government and military support in helping Lynch “take [the world]” away from Southern whites. But ultimately, Stoneman comes to regret his indoctrination of Lynch, likening his actions to “warm[ing] a black viper.” The play ends with Lynch attempting to forcibly (with a weapon given him by Stoneman “from the government arsenals”) marry Stoneman’s daughter Elsie. The moment comes after Stoneman commends Lynch for having “proven your manhood by your lion courage.” Emboldened by the compliment, Lynch confesses his love for Elsie, and Stoneman, with “the words of fraternity and equality yet warm on [his] lips,” tells Lynch he has “no ambition that [his family line] should end in a brood of mulatto brats.”

Suddenly Stoneman is re-drawing the line at “political equality,” but it is too late. Lynch wants “absolute equality,” which he and Stoneman have, since posting the militant proclamation on the Cameron home, defined as “The right to love and wed one’s love as the badge of human fellowship.” As he struggles to save his daughter, Stoneman demands of Lynch, “Have I not struck the chains of slavery from your race?” Lynch then responds with what Dixon and his audience see as the core conundrum of Reconstruction, the “negro question”: “You’ve stripped the rags of slavery from a black skin, but what are you going to do with the man? This man with

a heart that can ache and break.” Just as Lynch is about to execute his ambition, either through marriage or with the gun (it is clear which Stoneman would prefer: “My God, will you kill your own child?” “Sooner than see her in your arms – by God, I will.”), Ben Cameron and the Ku Klux Klan storm in to save the white domestic/Republic, and the curtain drops.

It is likely that Dixon truly believes he wants what is best for black Americans. But his condescension toward the “ignorant negro” pales next to the vitriol he feels for the educated one. It is Lynch, rather than Alec and Nelse, that plays out the very scenario that justifies the creation and mobilization of the KKK. Through Lynch, Dixon disposes of the aptitude argument against black suffrage. He does not doubt the intelligence of black radicals like W. E. B. DuBois and Kelly Miller; rather, he believes such men will destabilize American ideals and institutions. (And to the extent that such institutions as democracy and domesticity are saturated in white supremacy, he was not wrong.) But, significantly, Dixon never actually gives Lynch the opportunity of deploying the papers he accumulates. Lynch does not write the proclamation on intermarriage, nor is he the one to post it onto the Cameron house. It is Stoneman who posts the paper, and it is because of this that Act 1 ends with what Dixon depicts as Ben Cameron’s righteous rage.

Ben: (*Furiously to Lynch*) Who dared post that document in front of this house?

Stoneman: (*Interposing defiantly*) I did it, sir.

Ben: You –? ... Post this infamous proclamation, promising bayonets to enforce the marriage of blacks and whites? You, the father of a beautiful daughter?

Stoneman: It is the law – an official order of the Commanding General in Charleston.

Ben: So – (*Crossing to house – tear down the poster*) – this is your equality and democracy....

Stoneman: (*To Ben, and shaking off Elsie*) You have insulted the majesty of the Nation’s law. There’s yet time for retreat. Post that proclamation again!

Ben: (*Tears poster into bits and throws it in Lynch’s face – who shoots him a look of mortal hatred*) I’ll see you in hell first!

Stoneman's command for Ben to post the proclamation again, and Ben's defiance, means posting the paper is the more political act than writing it. It is precisely because Stoneman posts the proclamation, rather than Lynch (even though it is Lynch that bears the brunt of Ben's violence), that Ben Cameron cannot dismiss it as a "scrap of paper." In fact, even though he is physically doing just that – tearing the paper into scraps – he is unable to do the same ideologically because its author was white. Ben is initially furious when he thinks Lynch had written or posted the proclamation, but on finding out it was Stoneman – the father of his paramour – he is taken aback, perhaps even traumatized, by the division he sees opening up between the nation's white citizens. It is in most explicitly here in this exchange between Stoneman and Ben Cameron that Dixon's call for national unity should be read rather as a call for a unified white nationalism. Dixon seems ready to dispute and dismiss what he considers black radicalism on its own terms; it is the idea of white power being used to elevate and legitimize black radicalism that Dixon seems to find more disturbing. In this way, the KKK, and Dixon's glorification of their agenda, is ultimately as much about policing whiteness as it is extinguishing blackness.

Conclusion: Why and How to Read Dixon

"The Clansman" is certainly not original in its judgment of black Americans as incapable of a moral, authentic citizenship; nor is it unique in construing the social and political ascendancy of blackness in America with the downfall of Western civilization.²¹ But Thomas Dixon's white supremacist narratives continue to manifest, even today, in a spectrum of forms that range from casual racism to police brutality to mass murder. For example, a survivor of the

²¹ We see how a popular logic of chattel slavery – that descendants of Africa, a presumably inferior polity, "[are] not endowed with the mental and spiritual qualities needed to be a viable member of of Western civilization in general, and the evolving American civilization in particular" – reverberates after emancipation and well into the twentieth century (Roberts 202).

2015 Charleston Church mass shooting recalls the killer Dylan Storm Roof shouting, “I have to do it. You rape our women and you are taking over our country. And you have to go.”²² The ideological and material damage Dixon has wreaked over the last century makes it tempting for contemporary critics to translate their disdain for him into a feeling that he is unworthy of critical consideration. But to do so is dangerous. There are, of course, challenges to engaging Dixon. It means wading into and traversing his still-haunting iconography of “the black beast.” It forces the reader to confront a renewed circulation of belligerent vocabularies and demeaning representations, while avoiding both complicity and erasure. (In this essay, when quoting from the play, I attempt to navigate the difficulties of the n-word with my use of “n__.”) Engaging Dixon also raises the specter of the Dunning thesis historians from out of Columbia who passively sanction “The Clansman” in arguing that Reconstruction had been a socially, economically, and politically disastrous effort by “malevolent” Northerners (carpetbaggers) and “capricious” Southerners (scalawags) to enfranchise black men and ostensibly, by extension, disenfranchise whites.²³

So, reading Dixon and his ilk undeniably requires a certain caste of critical thinking, and it could be out of fear that students and certain media outlets lack this that we prefer to shelve supremacist literary histories than address them for the still-influential texts they are. But to the extent that institutions of higher learning do so, they play their part in perpetuating a discourse of partial-citizenship and enabling the volatile fictions (e.g. “post-racial America”) embedded therein. Conversely, there are a number of ways in which confronting these texts can yield the

²² See <http://www.nytimes.com/live/updates-on-charleston-church-shooting/gunman-was-quoted-as-saying-i-have-to-do-it/>. Jun 18, 2015. Accessed Apr 26, 2016.

²³ The Dunning school, renowned historian Eric Foner argues, “was not just an interpretation of history. It was part of the edifice of the Jim Crow System. It was an explanation for and justification of taking the right to vote away from black people on the grounds that they completely abused it during Reconstruction. It was a justification for the white South resisting outside efforts in changing race relation because of the worry of having another Reconstruction.... For a long time it was an intellectual straitjacket for much of the white South, and historians have a lot to answer for in helping to propagate a racist system in this country.” See <http://www.thenation.com/article/how-radical-change-occurs-interview-historian-eric-foner/>. Feb 3, 2015. Accessed Apr 10, 2016.

very type of thinking necessary to productively interrogate them. Doing so is more than a little discomfiting, and it is, for this very reason (especially for white students and scholars of American history and culture), an essential step in unsettling the caustic assumptions of a collectively imagined modal, heteronormative, Anglo-Christian citizen-subjecthood. Contending with Dixon means chronicling the history of his logics, taking us directly to the door-step of venerated figures like Thomas Jefferson, whose works we *do* circulate regularly, though most often not to confront the anti-blackness that is the foundation for early American citizenship discourse.²⁴ And arguably, avoiding Dixon short-circuits a fully authentic engagement with the work of those like Kelly Miller, James Weldon Johnson, and W. E. B. DuBois who challenged Dixon directly.

I have no interest in complicating Dixon, as others have done already, as a figure whose legacy and politics go beyond issues of race.²⁵ I do not believe we need to do so – to me it borders on apologetics – in order to contend for reading him as the author of the 1920s KKK revival (hard as he might have tried to distance himself from it) and a literary forefather of today’s alt-right counter-movements, and therefore as one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. Unless we attend to Dixon, the Obama birther conspiracy and other social urgencies of the present might too easily become historically isolated from their racist moorings. Literary historians of race and US citizenship should engage Dixon because he forces us to consider carefully the ethical stakes of criticism and to avoid the pursuit of easy answers. And with the upcoming sesquicentennial of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1868) and the recent centennial of D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which is based on “The

²⁴ Among the many reasons Jefferson gives for why the nation should evict emancipated slaves, Dixon most closely identified, as did most of the nation, with the fear that the slave, “when made free, might mix with, [and stain] the blood of his master” (Jefferson 151.)

²⁵ See Raymond Cook, who feels Dixon’s anti-socialist politics merit equal scrutiny alongside his legacy as one of the most influential racists in American literary history. See also Anthony Slide.

Clansman” and was the first film to be screened at the White House, it seems an appropriate moment to begin more earnestly scrutinizing the popular and provocative arts and letters of bigoted ideologies that continue to shape the way much of the nation thinks about race, sexuality, religion, and citizenship.