3 Anti-Tom and *The Birth of a Nation*

The white women of the South are in a state of siege. . . . Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her. . . . Shall men . . . demand for [the demon] the right to have a fair trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine. . . . Civilization peels off us . . . and we revert to the impulse . . . to "kill! kill! kill!"

—South Carolina senator Ben Tillman, 1907

Some people were crying. You could hear people saying God. . . . You had the worse feeling in the world. You just felt like you were not counted. You were out of existence. I just felt like . . . I wished somebody could not see me so I could kill them. I just felt like killing all the white people in the world.

—William Walker (on recalling viewing *The Birth of a Nation*)

In July 1914, carpenters working on a large vacant lot between Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards began to construct the main street of Piedmont, South Carolina, for the primary set of D. W. Griffith's new film, then titled *The Clansman*. According to Karl Brown, Griffith's assistant camera operator, force of habit instilled by years of backstage training caused the carpenters building the street to include hinges on scenery so it could be easily "folded up and shipped to any op'ry house in the country" (Brown 1973, 64). These unnecessary hinges on stationary film sets for an antebellum southern town are a dramatic reminder of the importance of the melodramatic stage

Figure 3.1 Main Street, Piedmont, South Carolina, the primary set for *The Birth of a Nation*.

tradition to the developing medium of film and of the crucial architecture of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within this tradition (Fig. 3.1). Brown explains in his memoirs:

> There was no question as to what the town should look like or how it should be dressed. I doubt if there was a man on that work crew who hadn't been out with a "Tom" show, as the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows were called. There were Tom shows scattered all over the country by tens and dozens. It was not so much a show as an institution, a part of the American scene for the past sixty-odd years. . . . Stage crews had been constructing Tom shows for so long that there wasn't a detail of the Civil War period, inside or out, that they hadn't built, up to and including wobbly ice for Eliza to flee across, one jump ahead of the bloodhounds, which were usually Great Danes. (Brown 1973, 63)

Brown's anecdote encapsulates the strange confluence of the most popular and influential play of the nineteenth century with the most popular and influential film of the early twentieth century. To evoke an antebellum southern town (which for Brown condenses, in the wake of the influence of the very film he had photographed, into a more general "Civil War period") was

automatically to conjure up the conventional architecture of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These two works, premiering in theaters over a half-century apart, were the unparalleled hits of their respective centuries and the pioneers of their respective media. Indeed, the multiple theatrical versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seem to have occupied something of the same position in the history of the melodramatic theater that the first run of Griffith's film occupies in the history of motion pictures. 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.[1] 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. To be a white American who saw a Tom show in the 1850s, or who saw *The Birth of a Nation* on its first release in 1915, was to be converted both to the power of a previously slighted medium and, through that power, to new kinds of racial feeling.

Woodrow Wilson's famous, though apparently apocryphal, statement—"It is like writing history with lightning"—has been the best remembered description of the film, conveying the thunderstruck impression of most audiences who became immediately convinced of its historical "truth."[2] What is often not recognized in this remark is the fact that the "truth" recognized here—the "southern view of slavery and Reconstruction"—had been previously disparaged. What *The Birth of a Nation* did, as a film, was to convert the nation to southern sympathy. More specifically, it converted an Uncle Tom–style sympathy for the sufferings of a black man to an anti-Tom antipathy for the black male sexual threat to white women. A somewhat less exalted critic than Woodrow Wilson, the gossip columnist Dorothy Dix, conveys the sense of how linked this conversion to a new racial sympathy and new historical "truth" was to the discovery of the new emotional power of the movies themselves: "I had considered the moving picture interesting, instructive, amusing, diverting, beautiful, spectacular, but I had believed that the silent drama never could touch the emotions very deeply. I had thought that to grip an audience, to melt it to tears with pathos, to thrill it with high heroic sentiment, required the spoken word and the magic of the human voice." But Dix finds *The Birth of a Nation* an "apotheosis of the moving picture" which can work up an audience to "a perfect frenzy" (Schickel 1984, 278–79).

Another critic of the time, Ward Greene, writing for the *Atlanta Journal*, comes closest to saying what was so unprecedented in the frenzies of feeling generated by the film: "Not as a motion picture, nor a play, nor a book does it come to you; but as the soul and spirit and flesh of the heart of your country's history, ripped from the past and brought quivering with all human emotions before your eyes" (Lang 1993, 179). A new sense of national historical truth: a new emotional power wedded to that "truth"—such were the feelings aroused by Griffith's deployment of the new medium. And these new feelings

were inextricably wedded to specific racial vilifications and victimizations. Greene's description of the emotional power of the film's climax offers an unguardedly precise identification of what the new medium had to offer:

> In the little town of Piedmont the blacks are celebrating, far away across the hills the Klan assembles. Back and forth the scene changes—one moment a street in Piedmont swirling with mad Negroes, the next a bugle blast from the orchestra and out of the distance riders of the Klan sweeping on and on. Back to the street and a house where a white girl trembles in fear before the black horde without, back with the bugle blast to the onrush of the Klan. They are coming, they are coming! . . . You know it and your spine prickles and in the gallery the yells cut loose with every bugle note. The Negro mob grows wilder and wilder, the white-shrouded riders are tearing nearer and nearer. Then, with a last mighty blast from the bugle, they sweep into the town and with a shattering volley hammer into the crowd. They fire back, they break, they flee. The Klan beats on them and over them . . . to rescue and retribution and final triumph. . . . And after it is all over, you are not raging nor shot with hatred, but mellowed into a deeper and purer understanding of the fires through which your forefathers battled to make this South of yours a nation reborn! (Lang 1989, 179, 181)

Here is a melodrama of pathos and action brought to new heights of "spine prickling" immediacy as moving pictures become literal movements of photographic pictures on the giant screen and as a full symphony orchestra pounds out the melos (indicated here in the blasts of the bugle). Though it is tempting to interpret Greene's enthusiasm as mere southern partisanship, I believe it is an accurate description of how the moving pictures of this film helped forge a new sense of national solidarity and identity—"a nation reborn!"—out of the sexual threats of black villains toward defenseless white women.

Uncle Tom's Cabin had deployed melos, pathos, and action to draw northerners who had previously been uninvolved in the debate over slavery into its orbit, making the "good nigger" into a familiar and friendly icon, for whom whites had sympathy. Now, sixty years later, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, *The Birth of a Nation* solidified North and South into a new national feeling of racial antipathy, making the black man into an object of white fear and loathing. We can see, then, that each work in its time 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*.

To the degree that critics have recognized the tradition that I am calling black and white racial melodrama, they have tended to emphasize its epic dimensions. Leslie Fiedler, for example, identifies a tradition of "inadvertent epic," extending from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Roots*, whose essence is a "subliterary" repository of the "most wild paranoid delusions" and "most utopian hopes" about the "relations of races, sexes and generations" (Fiedler 1979). To Michael Rogin, writing about *The Birth of a Nation*, epic is also the key: "American movies were born . . . in a racist epic" (Rogin 1984, 191). James Chandler (1990) has also argued for the epic influence on Griffith by opposing a traditional melodramatic lineage extending from Dickens, first argued in Eisenstein's influential essay, to a countertradition extending from Sir Walter Scott.[3] What these different claims share is an appreciation of the greater role of historical background in narratives that seem to shape the "imaginary community" of national self-consciousness.

While the term epic allows us to identify aspects of the Dixon-Griffith tradition that are new to the sequence of American melodramas of black and white I have been tracing—most significantly a new insistence on the texture of history itself—the appreciation of this texture should not keep us from perceiving the *melodramatic* "state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness" (James 1913, 168) most basic to these "moving pictures." To call *The Birth of a Nation* epic is to acknowledge its sheer size and historical appeal, but it is to miss the modernity of its melodrama and the uniquely American yoking of melodramatic form to a dialectic of racial pathos and antipathy. What is new about *The Birth of a Nation* is that it links new feelings about race to equally new feelings of national identity, based on an overt celebration of white supremacy developed as an answer to Tom sympathy. These Manichaean polarities of good and bad, black and white, need to be viewed as melodrama as well as epic. When Michael Rogin writes that American movies are born in a racist epic, he means, I think, that race has been a central and determining factor in the narratives of good and evil that white Americans have told themselves at the movies, and that with *The Birth of a Nation* movies became capable of forging a myth of national origin grounded in race to spectacular effect. However, we should not let the epic dimension of the big screen blind us to the fact that what this film does is what melodrama does: it stages a recognition of virtue through the visible suffering of the endangered white woman. My goal in this chapter will thus be to examine what is melodramatically familiar in Griffith and Dixon's film even as it inverts the racial values and feelings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

I should add that I am fully aware that the danger in this project is that it could fall victim to its own melodramatization by casting Stowe's novel in the role of virtuous, suffering maternal victim, and Griffith's film in the role of evil, patriarchal villain. In this case, Stowe's maternal vision of the virtuous humanity of slaves can be seen to do battle with the paternal "dark" view of their bestiality once freed.[4] Certainly this melodramatic conflict between "good" feminine and "bad" masculine racial melodrama animates some of the drama of the opposition. However, it is the further insight that these two traditions are ultimately two sides of the same coin that I hope will temper the melodramatic tendency of my own study. For what is fascinating in this tradition is not that the starkly contrasted "good" or "bad"—maternal or paternal, black or white—melodrama wins out in the end, but how imbricated each side of the opposition is in the other. There is no anti-Tom, to use Fiedler's useful term, without Tom. Let us begin, then, by trying to understand how Stowe's Tom story of racial sympathy became Griffith's anti-Tom story of racial hatred.

Thomas Dixon's Anti-Tom Novels

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, and the plays it spawned, generated an immediate cottage industry of literary and theatrical response in the South. We have already examined some of the stage versions of the anti-Tom response. Though inimical in racial feeling, these plays were deeply indebted to the Tom material for characters and situations. Twenty-seven plantation novels were written between 1852 and 1861. Many of these novels—written as apologies for slavery and featuring kind masters and happy slaves—frankly set out to "answer" the Tom story, and most of the rest directly attacked it in some form.[5] Like Stowe's novel, the anti-Tom literature is full of long polemical speeches addressed to the reader—speeches defending slavery through close readings of the Bible and the Constitution. Though both northerners and southerners produced this literature, the southern versions were more vehement defenses of the whole southern way of life. The heroes of these novels are kindly plantation masters who, unlike George Shelby, hold on to their slaves despite debts; the slaves are faithful and happy or sometimes misguided rebels; whippings occur only rarely and for the slaves' own good; escaped slaves find unhappiness in the North and pine for the paternalistic care of their former masters (Gossett 1985, 212–38).

When Thomas Dixon, Jr., gave up his popular ministry to write a series of novels about the Reconstruction period, he revised this familiar antebellum, anti-Tom, novelistic tradition. His inspiration to write came in 1901 at a performance of a Tom play. Infuriated by what he saw as the injustice of the play's attitude toward the South, he vowed to tell what he considered to be its true story. The result of his first attempt, published the next year, was a sprawling 469-page historical novel entitled *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden 1865–1900*. It would be followed in 1905 by the more tightly focused *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*.

Both of these novels would then be combined into Dixon's 1905 play, *The Clansman*, which in turn became the basis of Griffith's 1915 film.

Dixon's work is distinguished from the earlier anti-Tom tradition in its focus on the postbellum period and in its revisionist concession that slavery had been a mistake. However, the primary impetus of his work originates, like the earlier anti-Tom novels and plays, in a passionate refutation of the main line of romantic racialist feeling generated by Stowe.[6] In *The Leopard's Spots* an "unreconstructed" southerner gives Harriet Beecher Stowe every bit as much credit for causing the Civil War as Lincoln once did: "A little Yankee woman wrote a crude book. The single act of that woman's will caused the war, killed a million men, desolated and ruined the South and changed the history of the world" (Dixon 1903, 264).

In 1852 Stowe was writing against the injustices of the present. In 1903, Dixon was writing against the injustices of the past (specifically attempts to give the vote to African Americans during Reconstruction). As James Chandler (1990, 230–31) has noted, this focus on the past lends his work its distinctive quality of historical romance. Yet by the time Dixon was writing against Stowe, her novel and the entire Tom tradition had itself passed into history, with Tom, Eliza, Topsy, and Simon Legree perceived as the very icons of the antebellum and Civil War era.[7] We can see, then, that part of the appeal of the historical form he adopts is that it offered his best possible response to what was by then seen as Stowe's own historical tradition. It is not surprising, then, that Dixon's strategy, in his first anti-Tom novel, was to write a kind of historical sequel to the adventures of some of her main characters.[8]

The Leopard's Spots begins at the end of the Civil War, with ragged Confederate soldiers returning to face a new struggle against a black enemy at home. The characters derived from Stowe's novel do not occupy central stage; they are brought on to score ironic points against the general ethos of interracial amity of the Tom material. Recognizing that Simon Legree had become the very type of the melodramatic villain, Dixon makes no effort, as earlier anti-Tom literature did, to rehabilitate him as a kindly master. Rather, he attempts to one-up Stowe historically by using him as the ideal representative villain for each of the later historical periods portrayed. Thus Legree becomes a cowardly draft dodger disguised as a woman during the Civil War, a carpetbagger politician stirring black men to agitate for the right to marry white women during Reconstruction, and a rapacious Yankee industrialist during the latter part of the century.[9] This final incarnation allows Dixon to bring Legree into conflict with yet another of Stowe's characters, "George ([*sic*]) Harris," the mulatto son of George and Eliza, named Harry in Stowe's version.[10]

Dixon has George Harris sent to Harvard to become the protégé of the Honorable Everett Lowell of Massachusetts. Encouraged to improve himself by Lowell, George eventually aspires to do so by marrying Lowell's daughter.

When he is rudely rejected by Lowell, George wanders the nation in search of work. Aided by a labor leader and Quaker preacher who is another descendent of a Stowe character, George is turned away everywhere, eventually even at one of Simon Legree's mills. Throughout this sequel Dixon drives home his ironic anti-Tom moral: the Harvard-educated son of George and Eliza Harris begs in vain for the privilege of serving as Legree's wage slave.[11] Despairing of work in a world run by Simon Legree, George turns to crime and uses his proceeds to place wreaths on the ash-heaps of lynched Negroes, feeling constantly "the grip of Simon Legree's hand on his throat" (Dixon 1903, 407).

Without actually idealizing the "good old days" of slavery—which he has several staunch southern characters admit were an economic and social mistake—Dixon nevertheless wants his readers to long for a time when blacks knew their place and did not need to suffer the agonies of lynching, for political and social equality inevitably leads in Dixon's novels to the black male claim to the white woman as a mate. As one character puts it, "The beginning of Negro equality . . . is the beginning of the end of this nation's life" (244). "Mongrelization" of the races is Dixon's greatest fear. The burning question of the novel is posed repeatedly and italicized for emphasis: "*Can you hold in a Democracy, a nation inside a nation of two hostile races?* We must do this or become mulatto, and that is death" (Dixon 1903, 244).[12]

Such, then, are the explicitly racial, explicitly anti-Tom politics of Dixon's first novel, as it directly attempts to refute Stowe's romantic racialism with a new twentieth-century demonic racism. Dixon attempts to dismantle this structure by turning the "good nigger" bad by sexualizing his relations with white womanhood and by having him assault the "holy of holies"—the white female virgin. The effect, in terms of its affront to the Tom tradition, is as if Tom were shown to lust after Little Eva. Thus Stowe's antebellum, feminized "good Negro" is sexualized and demonized into the postbellum, hyper-masculine rapist who can only be stopped by lynching. Stowe describes Uncle Tom in the novel as "a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindliness and benevolence" (1983, 18). Stowe's Tom is certainly not feminine in his physical features—"large, broad-chested," "glossy black"—but his masculine physicality leaves the details of his "truly African features" quite vague, tempered by feminine qualities of soul—kindliness, benevolence, dignity, humility, and so on.[13]

Compare Dixon's description from his second novel, *The Clansman*, of another uncle, Uncle Alec:

> His head was small and seemed mashed on the sides until it bulged into a double lobe behind. Even his ears, which he had pierced and hung with red earbobs, seemed to have been crushed flat to the side of his head. His kinked hair was wrapped in little hard rolls close to

> the skull and bound tightly with dirty thread. His receding forehead was high and indicated cunning intelligence. His nose was broad and crushed flat against his face. His jaws were strong and angular, mouth wide, and lips thick, curling back from rows of solid teeth set obliquely in their blue gums. . . . His thin spindle-shanks supported an oblong, protruding stomach, resembling an elderly monkey's, which seemed so heavy it swayed his back to carry it. (Dixon 1905a, 249)

In contrast to Stowe's generality, Dixon offers specifics, assuming that villainous qualities of soul emanate from "angular jaw," "thick lips," "cunning forehead," and "spindle shanks." To Stowe the feminine soul transcends the masculine body. To Dixon there is no spiritual transcendence for the Negro who is all animal, even when, like Uncle Alec, he *isn't* lusting after white women. Thus it is not simply that Stowe feminizes the black man, while Dixon hypermasculinizes him; it is also that Stowe deemphasizes the corporeal for the spiritual, while Dixon sees blackness as an excess of the corporeal that harks back to the jungle and retards civilization.

Where the antebellum, anti-Tom literature had shared minstrelsy's fascination with a highly visible, commodified black body, viewed as comically different, Dixon counters these familiar comic stereotypes with a rabid horror of all things black. In effect, he challenges both Stowe's depiction of black spirituality and minstrelsy's depiction of comic sexuality. In *The Clansman*, for example, the traditional northern distaste for the physical features of blacks—criticized by Stowe in Aunt Ophelia's first reactions to Topsy—is vindicated. Elsie Stoneman, daughter of the Radical Reconstructionist Austin Stoneman (modeled on the Radical Reconstruction leader Thaddeus Stevens), recoils at the touch and smell of Negroes and fires her black cook for feeding her children in the kitchen.

Insistently, Dixon counters the myth of the gentle, familiar, melodic, and rhythmical "good nigger" with a new myth of the rapacious "bad nigger." Citizenship had transformed the black man from a piece of property into the potential owner of property, including the property of women. As Robyn Wiegman explains, the black man's threat to white masculine power thus "arises not simply from a perceived racial difference, but from the potential for masculine sameness" (1995, 90). It was this possibility of sameness that the rape myth disavowed. Its peculiar logic was to exaggerate the very quality of masculinity that granted black men the vote. Excessive, hypermasculine corporeality disqualified him from manhood, reducing him to the status of beast. Dixon's predatory beast is forever baring his fangs and claws.

This new dangerous corporeality of the black male also operated to mask the white male's own previous participation in miscegenational sexual activities. Projecting his own sexual unruliness onto the villainous beast, the white male placed on southern women the burden of preserving an integrity of racial distinctions that many white masters, like Simon Legree, had often violated. The myth of the bestial black rapist transferred the focus of sexuality from the white man's quasi-sanctioned (because economically productive) sexual activities with black women to the spectacularized bodies of black men (Wiegman 1995, 84). Thus, instead of Stowe's discrete portrayal of a historically more accurate white male / black female interracial sexual violence, Dixon offers a historically exceptional example of black male / white female sexual violence.

The painfully obvious double standard could only mean that white women were meant to be the sole property of white men, while black women could be the property of all. The myth of the black rapist reached its most pathological proportions at the turn of the century (the time of Dixon's writing), due partly to its congruence with the exaggerated sexual tensions of a dying Victorianism. According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, it may have been no accident that the vision of the hypermasculine Negro flourished during a time that was also the first organized phase of the women's rights movement in the South (Hall 1993, 148, 153). The New Woman, for example, hovers over Dixon's novels as a potential threat to white patriarchy much more forcefully than she does over Griffith's film.[14]

The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan (1905) abandons the vast historical panorama of *The Leopard's Spots* to concentrate on the immediate period of Reconstruction and the rise of the Clan. Dixon here makes his main character, Ben Cameron, a Clan leader and makes the novel's climax a dramatic rescue. The result is a more effective melodrama, alternating political drama in Washington with the story of the aristocratic Cameron family of Piedmont, South Carolina, and the northern Stoneman family. Thus, while the Radical Republicans maneuver to impeach Andrew Johnson, the Camerons pick up their lives after the war and become romantically entangled with the Stonemans.

In this novel, Dixon stages the pathos of the white women endangered by black men in a key scene showing the brutal rape of Marion Lenoir, by the former slave Gus. Gus's punishment by lynching can be read in gendered terms as a castration that returns the hypermasculine body to its prior feminized state.[15] Dixon, however, gives very little physical detail, either of Gus's attack or of the Clan's lynching of Gus. He concentrates, instead, on an almost obsessive deployment of evidence of the crime. In a first instance, he has Dr. Cameron examine the dead eyes of the mother who witnessed the crime.

> "I believe that a microscope of sufficient power will reveal on the retina of these dead eyes the image of this devil as if etched there by fire. The experiment has been made successfully in France. . . .

> Impressions remain in the brain like words written on paper in invisible ink. So I believe of images in the eye if we can trace them early enough. If no impression were made subsequently on the mother's eye by the light of day, I believe the fire-etched record of this crime can yet be traced." (Dixon 1905a, 312–13)

Though Dr. Cameron does indeed find "evidence" of the crime etched in the woman's retina, he resorts to yet another form of indexical registration of the body of the black rapist in measurements of his bare footprint: "The white man was never born who could make that track. The enormous heel projected backward, and in the hollow of the instep where the dirt would scarcely be touched by an Aryan was the deep wide mark of the African's flat foot" (Dixon 1905a, 310). These putative racial characteristics of the foot are then presented as evidence at the Clan's "trial" in a cave. The primitive cave location suggests Dixon's at least unconscious awareness that he is dangerously flirting with the white man's own regression to primitive, beastlike status.

The crowning piece of evidence, and high point of the melodrama in the chapter entitled "The Fiery Cross," is the moment the ever-scientific doctor hypnotizes Gus to induce him to reenact the crime by the torchlight of the cave with hooded Clansmen as jury.

> Gus rose to his feet and started across the cave as if to spring on the shivering figure of the girl, the clansmen with muttered groans, sobs and curses falling back as he advanced. He still wore his full Captain's uniform, its heavy epaulets flashing their gold in the unearthly light, his beastly jaws half covering the gold braid on the collar. His thick lips were drawn in an ugly leer and his sinister bead-eyes gleamed like a gorilla's. A single fierce leap and the black claws clutched the air slowly as if sinking into the soft white throat. (Dixon 1905a, 323)

These various strategies of evidence all boil down to detailed descriptions of the black male body—of Gus's jaw and lips as imprinted on the mother's retina, the indexical imprint of his oversized foot, and his whole racialized and sexualized body as he physically reenacts the crime. In each case, the very absence of hard evidence of the act itself becomes the occasion for a ritualized enumeration of the features of the black body that are themselves considered incriminating. These features come to stand in for the unmentionable details of the crime itself.[16]

The other side of this obsession with the unmentionable act of sexual violation was, of course, the often equally sexualized punishment of lynching.[17] The term lynching originated during the Revolutionary War when Charles Lynch of Virginia formed a vigilante association to rid the area of plundering Tories. After the war, Lynch's illegal violence was exonerated by the legislature, and the verb form of his name came to mean a half-accepted

form of vigilante justice, often carried out by elite landowners but rarely involving murder. After the Civil War, however, lynching came to take on new meaning: as systematic terror against blacks, actually reaching its height not during Reconstruction and the reign of the KKK but in the 1880s and 1890s.[18] In this period "lynching" could include torture, hanging, burning, mutilation, and castration.

In *The Clansman*, Dixon's description of Gus's punishment is remarkably reticent. After the "trial," when the hysterical Clansmen are ready to rip Gus to pieces, Dr. Cameron is seized instead by "a sudden inspiration." Taking a silver cup, he mixes the blood of the raped virgin with river water and ties together two sticks in the form of a cross. Back inside the cave he adapts "the old Scottish rite of the Fiery Cross" to a new form of worship, proclaiming that the liquid "red stain of the life of a Southern woman" represents a "priceless sacrifice on the altar of outraged civilization." At this point Ben Cameron removes his hood and pronounces Gus's sentence of execution. How he dies, we do not learn. Thus, in Dixon's novel, the animal passion of the Clansmen is sublimated into the ritual celebration of the southern woman's "priceless sacrifice."

Dixon builds white male solidarity around the ritual celebration of the white woman's bloody "sacrifice," rather than around the bloody sacrifice of the black male scapegoat. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes, the constant threat of rape was not simply a rationalization used to obscure the real function of keeping black men in their place, it was also a way to keep white women in their place. The "fear of rape, like the threat of lynching, served to keep a subordinate group in a state of anxiety and fear" (Hall 1993, 153). Thus, it is in a very real sense that the white woman is sacrificed "on the altar of outraged civilization." White men need her to be sacrificed to keep both blacks *and* women in their place. This sacrifice, ultimately, was Dixon's most successful revenge on Mrs. Stowe.

Aside from the radical shift from Stowe's negrophilia to Dixon's negrophobia, the biggest structural difference in these novels is the displacement of Stowe's narrative of bondage and escape into the familiar model of heterosexual romance.[19] In his 1905 play *The Clansman*, a theatrical condensation of key elements of his two novels, Dixon would find a more powerful anti-Tom formula by forgoing his attempt to respond to Stowe explicitly.[20] Abandoning the Legree villain altogether, Dixon replaced him partly with the Radical Republican senator Austin Stoneman, and partly with the ironically named Silas Lynch, his mulatto protégé. Where the George Harris figure in *The Leopard's Spots* had been a figure of pathos, wandering the country from ash heap to ash heap of lynched Negroes, Silas Lynch—whose very name, as Michael Rogin (1984, 208) notes, turns black victims of lynching into aggressors—combines the pathos of the tragic mulatto (doomed to be accepted by neither race) with cunning villainy.[21]

When, in his play, Dixon decided to make Silas Lynch a primary villain, not merely offending Elsie with his corporeal presence, but sexually forcing that presence upon her, he finally found the perfect replacement for Simon Legree. The echo of their initials suggests that Dixon was aware of their similar functions. Where Simon Legree is a white man in sexual possession of mulatta concubines, Silas Lynch is a mulatto seeking possession of a white woman. Turning the mulatta victim into a mulatto villain, Dixon neatly reverses the racial markers of villains and victims. "Blame the mulatto" would seem to be one part of his racial melodrama. "Blame the mulatta" is its other part.

In the novel Austin Stoneman's mulatta "housekeeper," Lydia Brown, rules his household in Washington. Dixon hints that she is the real power behind the throne of radical reconstruction. He attributes Stoneman's desire to crush the South with Negro misrule to his perverse desire for this woman of "extraordinary animal beauty" (1905a, 57), who lords it over his hypocritical Radical Republican cronies.[22] As Michael Rogin 1984, 208–09 has persuasively argued, the Stoneman/Brown sexual relation in Griffith effects a double reversal that shifts blame for forced white male/black female interracial sexual relations from the South to the North and from the white man to the colored woman. Thus in the novel Lydia Brown becomes the racialized locus of evil female sexuality and Silas Lynch becomes that of the male.[23]

Dixon's two novels were instant popular successes.[24] They invited extravagant praise and condemnation along predictable sectional lines (Cook 1968, 73). The same thing was not true, however, of their theatrical combination. Produced by the aptly titled "Southern Amusement Company," the play swept triumphantly through the South, garnering enthusiastic reviews and sometimes generating controversy among those southerners who subscribed to more liberal racial views.[25] Dixon exacerbated the controversy by giving curtain speeches to make sure audiences got his point.[26] The play's tour continued to sell out throughout the Midwest and the West, where it was more controversial but still successful. On the strength of these successes, a second company was put together for New York City that premiered January 8, 1906, at the Liberty Theatre—where *The Birth of a Nation* would receive its New York premiere nine years later. Here was Dixon's chance to "teach the North" its lesson about white southern suffering. To the surprise of many, it sold out there as well (Cook 1968, 145–46).[27]

Thus Dixon capitalized on the notoriety of his play to preach the anti-Tom message that had impelled him to write fiction and drama in the first place.[28] Five years after he had seen the Tom show whose love for the antebellum Negro had changed the racial sentiments of the North, Dixon had made a significant assault on those sentiments. However, his radical racial views excoriating Negroes still represented the extreme fringe of southern politics. Though the tour of his play beyond the South represented a measure of success, conservative racial views, which simply wanted to maintain the Negro's

inferior position, were still much more dominant in the South. Liberals supporting uplift represented another minority. As melodrama, however, Dixon's ideas had an emotional viability and power that his speeches and sermons did not. The ultimate proof of that viability would, of course, be the reconfiguration of its major sentiments by Griffith into a film that would finally do in the Progressive Era what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had done sixty years before and what the minor success of Dixon's novels and plays had not done: alter *national* sentiments about race.

The Birth of a Nation

Legend has it that when D. W. Griffith's film *The Clansman* was given a preliminary screening at New York's Liberty Theater, Thomas Dixon called out to Griffith across the auditorium that its title was too tame for such a mighty work and that it should be called *The Birth of a Nation* (Williamson 1984, 175; Cook 1968, 168). Richard Schickel (1984, 246, 268) doubts the authenticity of this story, since there is evidence that the name had already appeared as a subtitle in early advertising of the film. It seems likely that Dixon's renaming was more a confirmation of a title that had already been floated by publicists. Either way, however, the idea of a spirit of national rebirth forged through the expulsion of racial scapegoats is deeply embedded in Dixon's work.[29]

One effect of this renaming, over time, has been to distance Griffith's film from its sources in Dixon. Though Dixon's contribution would often be acknowledged, it would more frequently be viewed as a source that had been transcended. Poet Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture*, published in 1915, set the trend. Lindsay claims that whenever Griffith follows *The Clansman* his film is bad, but whenever "it is unadulterated Griffith, which is half the time, it is good" (Lindsay 1915, 75–76). As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, *The Birth of a Nation* came to be regarded as the film in which the movies themselves were born and D. W. Griffith became known as the first "father" of film. By 1939 Lewis Jacobs would claim that *The Birth of a Nation* "foreshadowed the best that was to come in cinema technique," and that it "earned for the screen its right to the status of art" (Jacobs 1939, 171). In 1958, southerner James Agee went beyond all previous claims with this much-quoted pronouncement: "He achieved what no other known man has ever achieved. To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man" (313). More recently, in a 1981 history of world cinema, David Cook writes:

> The achievement of David Wark Griffith (1875–1948) is unprecedented in the history of Western art, much less Western film. In the brief span of six years, between directing his first one reeler in 1908 and *The Birth of a Nation* in 1914, Griffith established the narrative language of the cinema as we know it today, and turned an aesthetically inconsequential medium of entertainment into a fully articulated art form. He has been called, variously, and for the most part, accurately, "the father of film technique," "the man who invented Hollywood," "the cinema's first great auteur," and "the Shakespeare of the screen." (Cook 1981, 59)

In most of these claims there is a persistent tendency to attribute what is great and wonderful in Griffith to his position as godlike, autonomous originator positioned outside of time and history, and to attribute what is embarrassing and racist in him to his local, time-bound influences. This is how historian David Cook continues his assessment: "He was unquestionably the seminal genius of the narrative cinema and its first great visionary artist, but"—and with Griffith there is always this "but"—"he was also a provincial Southern romantic with pretensions to high literary culture and a penchant for sentimentality and melodrama that would have embarrassed Dickens." Moreover, he was "a muddleheaded racial bigot, incapable of abstract thought, who quite literally saw all of human history in the black-and-white terms of nineteenth-century melodrama." The following is how James Agee puts his "but": "Even in Griffith's best work [there is much] that is poor, or foolish, or old-fashioned." Agee then goes on to note how limited Griffith was, with no "power of intellect," no "subtlety," little "taste," no capacity for growth, and saturated by the "mannerisms . . . assumptions and attitudes of the 19th century provincial theater" (Agee 1958, 315, 317).

What is striking in these reservations is not only how harsh they are following such high praise, but the dichotomy created between a "good"—aesthetic and universal—Griffith, speaking to all mankind, and the "bad"—nineteenth-century, melodramatic southern racist—Griffith, speaking only of the past and to whites. With respect to *The Birth of a Nation*, these dichotomies often boil down to the "good" first half of the film, showing the quaint ways of the antebellum South culminating in the Civil War, and the "bad" second half, showing the horrors of black rule corrected by the Ku Klux Klan. The "good" first half was seen as more Griffith's invention and the "bad" second half was blamed on Dixon.

A more recent tradition of scholarship on *The Birth of a Nation* has put the issue of race first and tackled head-on the evasions of past criticism. Michael Rogin (1984, 191), as we have already seen, begins his groundbreaking essay with the proclamation that American film is born "in a racist epic." And Clyde Taylor (1991, 13) rightly accuses the entire field of film studies of

celebrating the aesthetics of Griffith's film at the expense of investigating the meaning of an allegory of national identity founded on the exclusion of blacks as a co-defining anti-type.[30] Both critics have brilliantly argued that there is no separating the film's celebrated rhetorical and narrative achievements from its defamation of African Americans. Both works have also moved from blaming Dixon for the white supremacist ideology in the film to finding Griffith's adaptation even more hateful.[31]

My consideration of Griffith's film follows the lead of these important reassessments of the deeply embedded racism of this most influential of American films. However, because I am interested in the larger tradition of black and white racial melodrama, I argue that by the time Griffith's film swept the nation, it swayed national sentiment toward white southerners as victims of black "misrule," not because it was more vehement than Dixon, but because it drew more effectively on the pathos, action, and melos of what the Tom story had become in the postbellum period: a nostalgic look at the old South that included kindly affection for the black bodies that Dixon's radical credo so abhorred. Indeed, if there is a sense in which we can say that mainstream American film was "born" in a racist epic, then we need to see that this birth was not virgin; it was from the beginning already cross-fertilized by the romantic racialism of the Tom tradition. Thus it is not quite accurate to claim, as Rogin and Taylor do, that *The Birth of a Nation* represents the dramatic moment in American popular culture when sympathy for blacks converted to outright national race hatred, typified by the new sympathy for energetic white heroes rescuing white maidens in distress. Rather, as with its folded sets whose hinges and architecture were borrowed from Tom shows, our deepest understanding of this film will come through an appreciation of its place in a developing melodrama of black and white.[32]

We saw in the last chapter that when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first brought to the stage, numerous versions were realized before any dared to show the beating death of Uncle Tom. But once this hurdle was passed, any performance of the play in the antebellum period that depicted Tom's martyrdom became a potential threat to the Union. The more Tom suffered, the more sectional divisions were exacerbated, and the more incendiary the work.[33] We have also seen how postbellum theatrical and film versions attempted to paper over these divisions with icons of reunification, usually of Union and Confederate troops shaking hands on the battlefield. But no matter how much these latter versions tried, the old Tom story, whose most convulsive moments had come to stand for sectional division, could not be used to generate warm feelings of national reunion. Thomas Dixon had understood that the answer to Stowe could be found in the exaggerated suffering of the white woman at the hands of the hypersexual black man: the more the white woman suffered, the more sympathy would flow to the South. But like the novel and the stage versions of Uncle Tom, his version of the anti-Tom story did not bring about

national union either. It would take a new kind of Tom story—Dixon's rabid anti-Tom diatribe in solution with the more racially amical elements of Stowe's Tom story—to cover over these sectional divisions and to effect a "rebirth" of (a white supremacist) nation. *The Birth of a Nation* became an agent of national reunion because it offered to many whites in the North and South what felt like a fitting conclusion and answer to the sectional disunion of the Tom story. Thus, while later Tom shows and films attempted briefly to narrate the history of North and South in the aftermath of conflicts that its very story had helped to generate, Griffith's film, despite its radical shift from negrophilia to negrophobia, came to seem the logical continuation of the story of slavery. One reason was that, unlike Dixon but like Stowe, it told this story from the beginning.

The film begins with a prologue that treats the origins of slavery in the United States. An intertitle blames disunion on the presence of black bodies: "The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion." We see a minister praying over manacled slaves to be auctioned in a town square. The next intertitle notes: "The Abolitionists of the Nineteenth Century demanding the freeing of the slaves." We see a crowded church or meeting house in which a speaker gestures toward a slave while a black child is led up the aisle. Jane Gaines and Neil Lerner (2000) have shown that Joseph Carl Breil's original score introduced a theme labeled "The Motif of Barbarism" to accompany these early, and all subsequent, appearances of the threatening and ominous "black seed."[34] According to Breil, Griffith had hummed and chanted "some of the old croons of [the] mammies and [the] loose jointed young plantation negroes" to help Breil compose "the theme which opens the film . . . and which is thereafter ever applied to the description of the primitive instincts of the blacks" (Marks 1997, 186).

This "Motif of Barbarism" is of special interest to the study of black and white melodrama because it represents the first moment in this tradition in which the syncopated folk melos associated with Africans was appropriated to ominous, rather than nostalgic, or happy, purposes. In its first appearance here the "Motif of Barbarism" is immediately associated with a "tom-tom rhythm beating underneath and mildly syncopated melody" (Gaines and Lerner 2000, 5). Syncopation attached to connotations of "the primitive" was already well known in American popular music. It had become primarily known in the guise of portraying "happy-go-lucky darkies"—Breil himself uses variations on "Turkey in the Straw" to portray the slaves dancing near their cabins on the Cameron plantation several scenes later. However, syncopation attached to predatory sexual instincts was new. As we have seen, Thomas Dixon had regularly excoriated the "jungle rhythms" of African music. But he never succeeded in making his readers feel the evil of this music.[35] It would seem that Breil's score succeeded at vilifying some aspects of popular African-inflected folk music by replacing Dixon's diatribes against the music with a felt sense of its evil, even as it maintained the Stephen Foster tradition of associating virtue with the African "home." For Griffith also did not hesitate to have Breil, like the stage adaptations of Stowe, portray the "quaintly way" of the "Southland" via an adaptation of Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home."

Dixon had refused to tell "the story of slavery," not wanting to become an apologist for the very institution that brought the villainous "black seed" to American shores. Griffith seems to follow Dixon's sentiment toward slavery, blaming it on the slave traders.[36] But his willingness to take on a version of the story of slavery in this brief etiology, and to play out a more traditional antebellum anti-Tom plantation myth of the well-treated, childlike slaves in the rest of this first part of the film, gives him the ability to tell the story of slavery in a way that seemed a natural extension of Stowe. Not by telling the sequel of Stowe's characters, but by adapting and *detourning* her familiar story of slavery, Griffith becomes something more powerful than Stowe's anti-Tom opponent. He becomes her inheritor.

Dixon's novels and plays are full of speeches about sectional reunion. His ride of the Clan to save northerner Phil Stoneman at the end of his Clansman novel and Elsie Stoneman at the end of his play enacts a common purpose between North and South. Nevertheless, it was Griffith's film, and not Dixon's novel and play, that achieved the "moving picture" felt by many whites to heal national divisions. For it was not until Griffith's much grander ride "to save a nation" managed a much more effective form of racial exclusion than Dixon's lurid race hatred that audiences most deeply felt a sense of national rebirth in the empowering of the film's white hero.

Griffith's own explanation for the film's effect—that his "ride to the rescue" transcended that of ordinary melodramatic rescues—points to the important phenomenon of "multiple rescue operations" discussed by Michael Rogin. Rogin quotes Griffith's statement in his autobiography that upon reading Dixon's novel he skipped quickly through the book until he got to the Clan's ride: "We had all sorts of runs-to-the-rescue in pictures and horse operas. . . . Now I could see a chance to do this ride-to-the-rescue on a grand scale. Instead of saving one little Nell of the Plains, this ride would be to save a nation" (Rogin 1984, 191; Hart 1972, 88–89). The power of the grand climax of the film, to which many critics of the time refer, has been understood by Rogin as the effect of a new spatial-temporal organization made possible by the dynamization of cinematic editing.[37]

Most importantly, Rogin argues that the multiple rescues enacted by the ride of the Clan reenacted and reversed the Civil War battles that Griffith added to the first half of his film. Where blue and grey intermingle and become almost indistinguishable in the Civil War charges in the first half, the white robes of the Clan stand out against black masses in the second. Clans-

men on horseback tower over black men on foot. "Civil War close-ups show suffering; Clan close-ups show movement and power" (Rogin 1984, 222). Thus, the extreme pathos of the defeat of the South, which Dixon did not represent, resonates powerfully against the extreme action of the climax in which the Clan rescues everyone in sight. The extremes of pathos, typified by sufferings on the battlefield and in the famous painfully slow homecoming in which Ben Cameron registers the full measure of southern defeat in the soot-daubed cotton ("southern ermine") of his little sister's dress, are balanced by the extreme action of the Clan's vengeance on Gus and rescues that exceed Dixon's rescue of Phil (in the novel) or Elsie (in the play).

In these exciting climaxes Griffith, unlike Dixon, sets up two endangered groups, both in need of rescue. Northerner Elsie Stoneman is caught in the clutches of Silas Lynch in his house in town while a mixed northern and southern group composed of Dr. Cameron, his wife, daughter, the Cameron family's two former slaves, and Phil Stoneman are trapped in a rural cabin with two Union veterans. This cabin is surrounded by attacking black troops. Since this second endangered group differs considerably from its source in Dixon, it is worth examining.

As Negro "misrule" grows, Dr. Cameron is arrested for possession of a Clan costume—for which the penalty is death. After arrest he is taunted and humiliated in the slave quarters (a title reads, "The master paraded before his former slaves"). Two of his former slaves, Mammy and Jake, sympathetic "good" slaves borrowed from the Tom tradition and eschewed by Dixon, pretend to join the black mockers in order to position themselves to rescue the doctor. Jake jokes with the white captain, asking him "Is I yo equal cap'n—jes like any white man?" just before knocking him out.[38] Mammy, at the same time, pretends friendliness to two black soldiers, putting her ample arms around them and then crushing them to the ground with the weight of her body. Thus Griffith, unlike Dixon, comically heroicized his "faithful souls"—by which he means the types of Negroes who, like Uncle Tom, remained faithful and selfless in the service of kind masters[39]—by involving them in the rescue. The comic vein of these heroics, however, employing the obese (blackface) Mammy's body weight and an outlandish claim to equality, undercuts their seriousness. Nor are they very effective, since this preliminary rescue party led by "faithful souls" fails when a wheel falls off their wagon, causing all to seek refuge in a nearby Union Veterans' cabin. This failed rescue thus permits Griffith to maneuver this interracial group of whites and blacks, northerners and southerners, into a rural cabin where they will eventually be rescued by the Clan. Thereafter, the film cuts rapidly between Lynch's sexual threat to Elsie, the discovery of that threat by "white spies" disguised as blacks, the endangered extended "family" fighting off the black troops, and the Clan riding first to the rescue of Elsie, then to the family in the cabin.

The Cabin

Michael Rogin brilliantly argues that this rescue of the family from the cabin is not just from any cabin but a "Lincoln log cabin" whose refuge ironically democratizes and merges, as the famous intertitle puts it, "former enemies of North and South . . . reunited again in common defense of their Aryan birthright." Rogin thus shows us the national unity that Griffith's rescue accomplishes and that Dixon's didn't (Fig. 3.2). For if Dixon had radically shifted Stowe's sectionally divisive narrative of escape and bondage to romance and rescue, Griffith's innovative rescue of the cabin by the Clan radically shifts the meaning of what is rescued. The cabin wraps the former slave owners in the mantle of humble beginnings and reconciles former enemies (in the first part of the scene "Auld Lang Syne" is played). For while it is "former master" Dr. Cameron who is actually rescued, his location in the rural cabin—and his association with the humble Union Veterans frying bacon over their hearth—dissociates him from the once grand Cameron Hall and the institution of slavery. Griffith could easily have had the doctor take refuge in his own home and had the black troops surround it. During the first half of the film he had done just that when he showed the Cameron parents and daughters besieged in the house, while "black guerrilla" troops raided the town. However, this later variation of rescue replaces the iconography of the grand plantation with the humble home of the cabin, which the reenergized doctor defends vigorously with his North and South, rich and poor, black and white comrades. Griffith, unlike Dixon, thus makes his audience feel Stowe-like emotions of democratic inclusion even while rooting for the "common" defense of an exclusive "Aryan birthright."

But perhaps the real reason Griffith can get away with such contradictory gestures of white supremacy and democracy is that the association of this cabin is not limited to Abraham Lincoln. Its emotional and iconographic resonance extends further back than Lincoln, whom we have seen appear as an icon at the end of the post-war Tom shows, to the iconographically prior cabin of Tom himself.[40] We have seen how nostalgia for a democratic and humble "space of innocence" so central to all melodrama was located in the icon of Tom's cabin—the integrated place where Master George Shelby, Jr., once taught Tom how to read, where Mrs. Shelby came to weep with Tom and Chloe, and of which the songs "Old Folks at Home" and "My Old Kentucky Home" sang nostalgically. This cabin, which seems to function out of all proportion to its actual importance as a locale in the novel, hovers, as we have seen, over all Tom's longing, in speech and song, for the impossibly good, lost Kentucky home.[41]

The cabin, which we have seen on the cover of volume one of the novel's first edition (showing the doorway, several children, Aunt Chloe, and Tom;

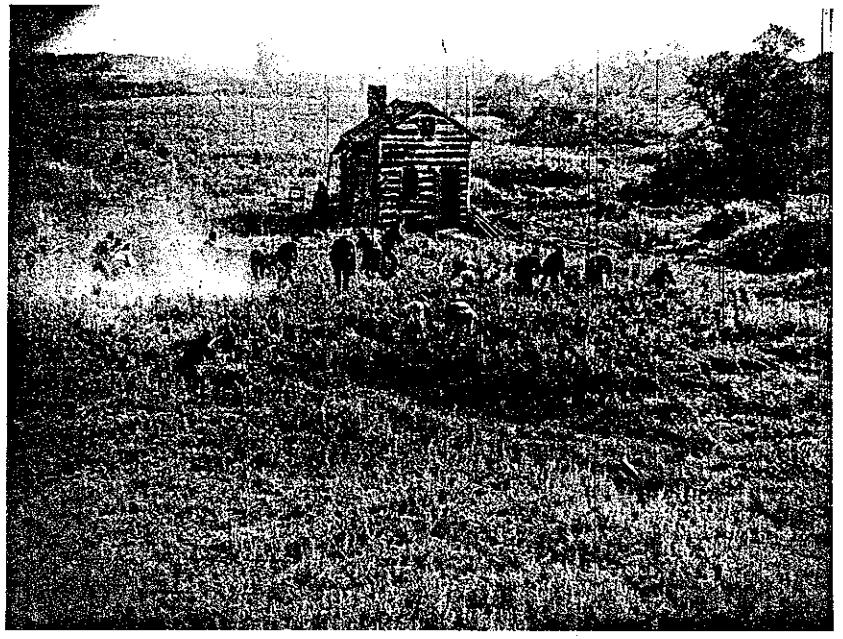

Figure 3.2 The "Lincoln" and "Tom" cabin besieged by blacks. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

see Fig. 2.1), also figured in the first act of most stage productions of the play. After the Civil War, traveling Tom shows would frequently include a mobile cabin as part of their parade through the streets of each new town. As the American *locus classicus* of honest and humble beginnings, the cabin has now become in Griffith's film as important a mantle of virtue for the former masters as it once had been for the former slaves. Symbolizing variously the elusive lost home of slaves, the poor but honest home of the free white man, it now attempts to spread its mantle of homey virtue over the sins of the former masters.

By "integrating" the cabin with the "Tom" figures of Mammy and Jake, with the humble Union veterans and Phil Stoneman, son of the Radical Republican, as well as with the former members of the slavocracy, the Cameron family, Griffith refunctions melodrama's all-important "space of innocence." The melodrama that once pictured Tom and Chloe as victims of an economic system that reduced humans to objects of exchange now makes the equivalent figures of Tom and Chloe "faithful souls" who participate as good guys in the melodrama of white victimization. Inside the cabin, Mammy fiercely and heroically fights off the black marauders, clubbing each intruding black head after the besieged group is out of ammunition; but, like her comic flattening of two black soldiers, her actions lack the heroic status of Eliza's desperate

protection of her child or Tom's heroic martyrdom. She has become the prototype of countless stage and screen Mammies to come, sharing in the pathos and action of white main characters. For her story only matters so long as the former masters and their new allies are themselves racially endangered.[42]

Stowe paints Tom's integrated cabin as an exceptional Eden in a state with the "mildest form of slavery," and then shows how "hard times come a' knocking at the door" in the form of sale downriver. The problem the Tom material faced was how to make the happy ending of the reunion of George and Eliza and Cassy feel as if it had regained something of this initial space of innocence when it could not physically locate that space in Kentucky—or indeed any place in the nation.[43] As we have seen, Stowe's projected reunion of the African family in Liberia lacks emotional conviction. Africa cannot resonate as home the same way as "Kintuck"—at least until Alex Haley rewrites Tom and anti-Tom to generate a new nostalgia for a lost African home.

Griffith, too, faced the problem of establishing a melodramatic space of innocence. He solved it by adapting Dixon's Reconstruction drama to a glowing portrait of antebellum culture much in the fashion of the earlier, anti-Tom, plantation novels. But Griffith could get away with such a regressive move because, unlike Dixon and the earlier plantation novels, he also told the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The representation of these more recent events made any idea of return to the good old days of the plantation impossible. Indeed, there is even a sense in which Griffith's portrayal of antebellum life pretends to the prelapsarian innocence of small-town rural America that is deeply indebted to the iconography of the postbellum Tom show.

Consider, once again, the architecture of the main street (Fig. 3.1), which Karl Brown informs us was built with unnecessary hinges that paid homage to the tradition of the traveling, postbellum Tom show. The set reveals that Griffith clearly understood that the locus of virtue does not reside in the big house of the plantation but in the humble rural home. Architecturally his street set is, in its own humble way, as revealing of the informing contradictions of his ideology as is the grand set of Babylon in his next film, *Intolerance* (1916).[44] The shot depicting Piedmont's main street is the first to introduce Griffith's "Southland," where, as an intertitle puts it, "life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more." It is pictured as a street and sidewalk in a sleepy southern town where white folks lounge on their front porches and stroll on the sidewalk, and a crowded cart with a group of Negroes passes by. In this frame enlargement, we see the cart as it passes before the modest picket fence of the Cameron abode. Inside the fence Jake stands facing the street and Mammy stands serving tea. The doctor and Mrs. Cameron sit near the classical columns of their porch. Soon, as the wagon in the foreground pulls down

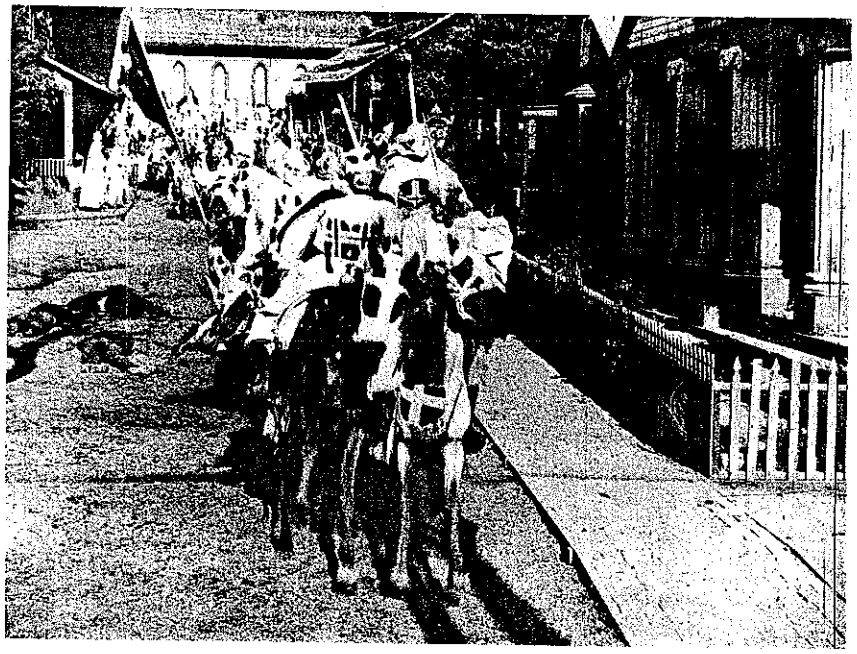

Figure 3.3 The Clan rides through the main street of Piedmont and past the humble site of the Cameron home. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

the street, two black children comically fall off it; a black man picks them up and carries one of them off. The Cameron family looks on in amusement.

At this point in the film the residence that is elsewhere in the film called Cameron Hall seems to be a modest house in town. Except for the four white classical columns, making it the most imposing house on the street, it nevertheless blends in with the other houses as one of several arrayed in a row. At the end of the street is a building that seems to be a modest church. Much of the action of the film will transpire on this main set, as for example when the Clan rides through town (Fig. 3.3). Clearly, what the Clan defends is meant to be seen as the values of such a modest white-picket-fence town.

At other points in the film, however, and especially when we see its interior, Cameron Hall earns its name as a grand manor. When the officers of what seems to be the entire Confederate army dance at its farewell ball we see a whole different world of size, scale, and elegance that is incommensurate with the modest front porch on the sleepy main street depicted earlier. At these points Cameron Hall becomes a grand plantation with cotton fields, slaves, and slave cabins. "Out back," the younger Camerons and Stonemans are seen to stroll, as an intertitle puts it, "Over the plantation to the cotton

Figure 3.4 Cameron Hall as plantation. "Over the plantation to the cotton fields." (*The Birth of a Nation*)

fields" where happy slaves pick cotton in the background (Fig. 3.4) to the accompaniment of Breil's adaption of Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home." Later, these same slaves dance to the tune of "Turkey in the Straw," during what the intertitles tell us is "the two hour interval given for dinner, out of their working day from six until six." After this familiar dance, so typical of the early portions of a postbellum "Tom show," a kindly Ben Cameron shakes hands with his slaves.

Griffith here deals with the same structural problem as Stowe: how to establish a melodramatic space of innocence within the culture of slavery. Both Stowe and Griffith needed a "home" whose virtue the happy ending could regain. To provide the felt sense of that home, Griffith paints both a traditionally romanticized picture of grand plantation life *and* a picture of a modest rural home iconographically borrowed from the postbellum Tom show. He thus constructs nostalgia for kindly masters and happy childlike slaves that Dixon, who abhorred the "black beast," did not share. The architectural contradiction that conceives of Cameron Hall as an ordinary house on Main Street—eventually to be converted into a humble boarding house—at the same time as a grand plantation is something more than a convenient condensation of locales necessary to the film's action. It is a condensation that

makes slavery itself morally legible to a Progressive Era audience impressed by the grandeur of the old South but democratically offended by the feudal conditions of bondage.

Thomas Dixon's anti-Tom strategy had been to avoid all romanticized depictions of the antebellum era, believing, as he did, that slavery had been a mistake in its importation of "black blood." Thus Dixon was at least consistent in his exclusion of blacks—even the "faithful" ones—from any nostalgic image of the past or any happy ending pointing to the future. Griffith, on the other hand, was democratically inclusive. He freely borrowed the nostalgicized musical associations with black culture that Dixon had so vehemently eschewed when he had Elsie give up the banjo and when he used "vulgar" Negro tunes to underscore the deaths of his raped white women.[45] He freely included Mammy and Jake as the good folks in need of rescue, granting them comic heroic status. Yet by virtue of including "faithful" blacks in the emotional sense of what the Clan was rescuing, he was later able to exclude them all the more effectively from any real presence in the "newly born" nation.

Griffith's exclusion of blacks is never represented as a calculated policy of Jim Crow politics but as a natural result of the rescue of the white woman from the black rapist. In each of the multiple rescues carried out in the last third of the film, black men are quite literally wiped from the screen by what poet Vachel Lindsay once called the "white Anglo Saxon Niagara" of the Clan.[46] Indeed, the ride of the Clan is repeatedly figured as a flushing of blackness from the screen. Chaos and disorder represented as dark bodies in riot (Fig. 3.5) are swept aside by the Clan (Fig. 3.6). This pattern is repeated with each new rescue, in which nearly all-black frames are suddenly flooded with white. When Elsie is rescued the shot begins with the white-robed Elsie, partly hidden behind her dark-clad father, surrounded by the black-clad Lynch and his dark-clothed black henchmen. When the white-robed Clansmen enter, they push the dark-clad Lynch and Stoneman to the side. Lynch cowers to the left and Stoneman is now mostly hidden behind Elsie's white gown (Fig. 3.7).

A most striking moment of black exclusion also occurs in a scene that an intertitle calls "Disarming the blacks." Griffith shows a group of black soldiers on foot in their dark Union uniforms surrounded on both sides by white-robed Clansmen on foot and horseback. The dark soldiers drop their guns and rapidly exit both front and rear of the frame, leaving an empty white middle that now blends with the white Clansmen on both sides. The culminating shot effectively "parades" the racial cleansing that the multiple rescues have accomplished in what an intertitle of some prints calls the "Parade of the Clansmen." Elsie and the group rescued from the cabin are surrounded on both sides by the white-robed and -hooded Clansmen. Since Elsie is still in her white gown and the rescued men are mostly without jackets, the effect is again of a flood of white almost completely filling the screen (Fig. 3.8). Not

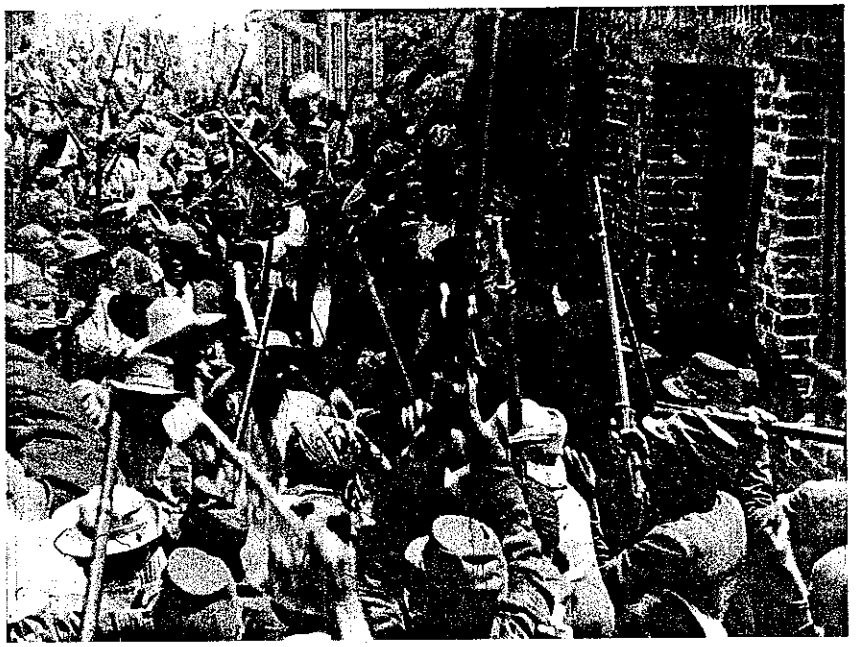

Figure 3.5 The chaos and disorder of rioting black bodies. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

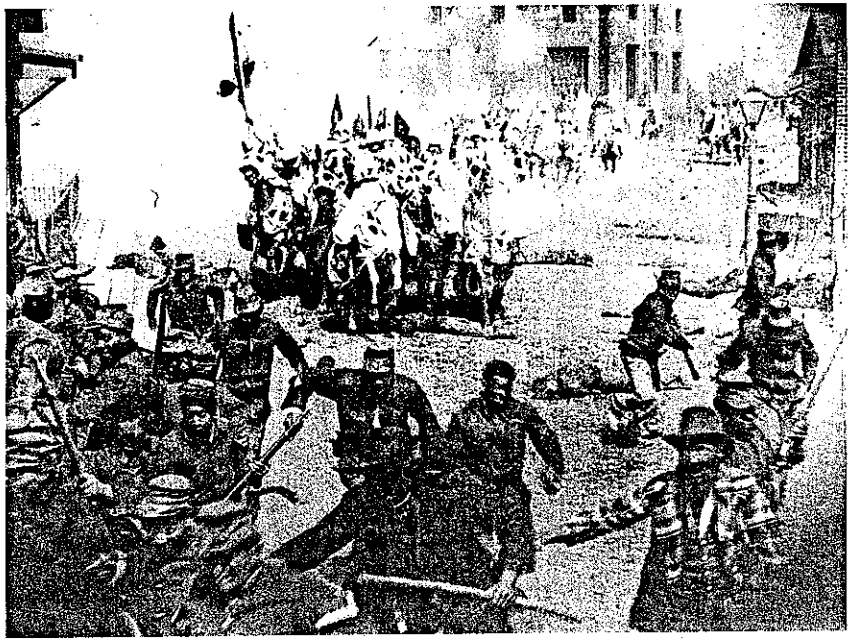

Figure 3.6 Dark chaos swept aside by the "white Niagara" of the Clan. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

Figure 3.7 Elsie rescued by the Clan. Evil black is pushed to the sides and background of the frame. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

surprisingly, neither Mammy nor Jake—nor any other "faithful souls"—are anywhere to be seen. The following shot shows a group of blacks watching the parade in fear, turning and almost tiptoeing away, again leaving the frame white. Repeatedly and variously, then, white images displace black. It would seem that Griffith's greater ability to borrow elements of Stowe's interracial amity in the picture of kind masters and "faithful souls" ultimately aids him in accomplishing a total whitewash of the screen.

Griffith's "good Negro" appears to have made it possible for his activation of greater race hatred as well—both in the sexual attacks on white women and in the Clan's punishment of Gus. For even though in Dixon's novel Gus actually rapes the Cameron family friend, Marion Lenoir, we have seen that Dixon substituted detailed descriptions of the horror of the lascivious black male body for descriptions of the horror of the act of rape. In his stage version, however, he was less willing to show the black beast in physical contact with the white woman and so changed the crime to Gus's pursuit of Flora Cameron (no longer Marion), culminating in her jump off a cliff to save herself from the proverbial "fate worse than death." In both the case of rape (in the novel) and attempted rape (in the play), he has Gus narrate the scenes while in a hypnotic state and thus avoids any direct depiction.

Figure 3.8 The parade of the Clan and the predominance of white filling the entire screen. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

Griffith, of course, directly depicts the Gus/Flora episode in the form of a prolonged chase, with Ben Cameron arriving too late for the rescue. However, his adaptation does not include any instances of actual black/white sexual aggression. To modern audiences used to all kinds of sexual attack, the sequence seems tame and Flora's jump a trifle premature.[47] But Griffith's other scene of sexual attack in the Elsie/Lynch episode is without parallel in Dixon, or in the history of film, for its depiction of black lust.[48] Indeed, Dixon's novel has no scene depicting Lynch's sexual assault—Lynch does not even ask for Elsie's hand. Although his play includes a scene in which Lynch asks both Elsie and then her father for her hand, it does not depict Lynch forcing his attentions upon her. In Griffith's film, however, Lynch begins the scene already, as an intertitle puts it, "drunk with wine and power." His strikingly lascivious sexual overtures to Elsie are drawn out over a long scene frequently intercut with the assembling of the Clans. In the first instance, after his initial proposal has been rudely repulsed, Lynch (played by the large and, here, swarthy George Siegman) kneels beside the seated Elsie and presses the hem of her white blouse to his lips. Elsie withdraws in horror to the door, which she finds locked. In the second instance Lynch, now seated in a chair and smiling at her, thrusts his hips forward and rubs his thighs insinuat-

ingly (Fig. 3.9). If there was any doubt as to the sexual nature of his gesture, Elsie's widening eyes and scream of horror make it clear (Fig. 3.10). It is at this point that Griffith first cuts to two Clansmen on horseback. The ride of the Clan thus appears entirely activated by this assault on a white woman. The scene continues, punctuated by frequent, brief crosscutting with the gathering of the Clans, Lynch grabbing Elsie and pushing her to the center of the room. He shakes a fist and pounds his chest, explaining the forced marriage; then he chases her further around the room until she finally faints into his arms and is held close to his body (Fig. 3.11) before being restrained in a chair.

The last twenty minutes of the film builds sexual threat upon sexual threat. The besieged "family" in the cabin is depicted in a melodramatic tableau showing Margaret Cameron kneeling at her father's feet as he holds the butt of a rifle over her head. In a parallel shot the young daughter of the Union Veteran embraces Mrs. Cameron. Over her head her father holds a rifle as well. In the next room of the cabin, already invaded by the black troops, a soldier leers over a white handkerchief left by one of the women. The melodramatic tableaux of two white fathers holding empty guns poised to bludgeon their daughters before permitting them to fall to the encroaching hordes, are reminiscent of Elsie's imminent danger of forced marriage to Lynch and Flora's solution of preferring death to the touch of the black man. Griffith thus multiplies the sexual threat to white women and with it the need for white counterviolence.

We saw in Dixon's treatment of the Clan's "trial" and punishment of Gus that Dixon seemed to be aware of the danger that white punishment of the black man for his sexual threat to white women might betray the white man's tenuous claim to be the guardian of civilization. When the Clansmen hear Gus's hypnotized reenactment of the crime, they prepare to rip Gus to pieces. However, Dixon had Dr. Cameron sublimate these emotions of naked race hatred into the solemn ritual of quenching a fiery cross in the blood of the white female victim. This ritual dignified white supremacist solidarity without indulging in the kind of naked brutality indicated in South Carolina senator Ben Tillman's 1907 speech quoted at the beginning of this chapter—the blood-hungry brutality of "kill! kill! kill!" Eschewing the black demon's right to a fair trial and advocating "lynch law," Tillman declaims: "Civilization peels off us . . . and we revert to the impulse . . . to 'kill! kill! kill!' " As Robyn Wiegman (1995, 96–97) points out, at such moments the racialized opposition between civilization and primitivity upon which white supremacy depends breaks down as the white man loses his own civilized veneer; civilization, like skin, " 'peels off' leaving only an aggressive impulse to kill."

Where Dixon seems wary of the danger of becoming like the black beast, and maintains a thin veneer of civilization by focusing on the ritual in place

Figure 3.9 Lynch rubs his thighs insinuatingly. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

Figure 3.10 Elsie responds with horror to Lynch's insinuations. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

Figure 3.11 Elsie faints in Lynch's arms. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

of the blood lust for Gus, it remains to be determined whether Griffith was equally wary. We cannot tell if his depiction of Gus's punishment is an example of civilization "peeling off," since no copy of the film contains a scene of punishment. The "missing scene"—as remembered in some detail from a 1933 screening of a supposedly more complete print by Seymour Stern—*could* constitute a clear example of civilization peeling off the white avenger, if we can trust Stern's memory. As Michael Rogin's essay on Griffith has argued (following Stern), today's prints of the film show Gus alive at the start of the trial, prostrate before the Clan jury, and then suddenly dead after a title pronounces the verdict: "Guilty." His body is then dumped on the porch of Silas Lynch's headquarters. Later in the film, as the Clans begin to gather, Ben Cameron performs the ceremony that Dr. Cameron performs in the play and novel, quenching the fire of the cross in the blood of the martyred woman.

Rogin thus accepts Stern's account of the missing footage, which runs as follows:

> Upon the pronouncement, "Guilty," a Clansman steps one pace forward and towers over *Gus's* huddled figure on the ground. . . . Then, as *The little Colonel* performs a mystic ceremony . . . the first Clansman, now to camera-left, back to camera, swiftly raises his arm, draped in white, and holds it aloft for one restraining second. The upraised hand clutches what appears to be a carving-knife or small sword. . . . Beethoven's music [the "Storm and Tempest" section of the Pastoral Symphony] now *cuts on the movement* of the Clansman stepping forward, which instantly follows the "guilty" *subtitle* [sic]. . . . It is upon the split-second *cut* of the first Beethoven outcrash that the Klansman's hand plunges the first time—and comes quickly up. . . . As the white-sleeved arm again poises for a split-second, the second crash of Beethoven's thunder is heard, and the avenging hand again swiftly plunges—and as swiftly pulls up in the same ritualistic and totemic gesture. . . . There is an instantaneous *cut* on the sound of the string instruments to the face of *Gus*, in close-up, the mouth flowing blood, the eyes rolling white in agony, the head falling back. The strings suddenly are dimmed by a third, terrifying, unexpected outcrash . . . roaring, like a final judgement over the dying Negro's face. In flash-cuts, the Klansman's hand now plunges and rises, plunges and rises, again, again, and still again, on each down-beat of the timpani, all within a few frames of film. On the final thunder-crash of the series, there is a final flash of the castrated Negro's pain-racked face and body. *Gus* is dead. (Stern 1965, 123–24).

Although Stern himself tries to argue that the sequence elicited "sorrow and pity" for Gus, his account of Beethoven's music, in concert with the rhythms of the plunging knife, suggests the visceral, irrational power of a sequence whose "emotional devastation" was "incalculable" (Stern 1965, 124). What is incalculable about his description of the devastation is, of course, the extreme aestheticization of the brutal gestures of the knife matched to the musical rhythms of the "Storm and Tempest" passage, and to the staccato rhythm of the cutting. If Stern's description of the sequence is accurate (and I think we need further corroboration from someone else at this 1933 private screening, since the print has never again surfaced and only Stern attests to it), it would represent an aestheticized moment of cinematic montage whose (implied) violence is on par with Alfred Hitchcock's no less sexualized attack on the body of Marion Crane in the shower sequence in *Psycho*.[49] That a montage with such "flash cuts"—even if cutting only to the suffering *face* of the black victim—would have anticipated by a full decade a style of cutting not known until the twenties is reason enough to doubt Stern's account. The absurd idea that it would have elicited "sorrow and pity" for Gus is even more reason to doubt. Rogin is right, however, to point to a gap in the narrative that was most likely filled by some form of violence performed on Gus. Whether that punishment was depicted as castration remains in doubt. So too does Michael Rogin's statement that "the nation was born in Gus's castration, from the wound that signified the white man's power to stop the black seed" (Rogin 1984, 219). It seems unwise to ground such a statement on a segment of film

recalled by an otherwise not very reliable witness. However, Rogin's more general point that the suppression of blacks was a form of castration consistent with the Jim Crow politics and widespread lynching of the Progressive Era is well taken. To a certain extent, Griffith's veneer of "civilization peels off," as he uses the full power of his art to give white audiences the thrill of watching the suppression of blackness. I think that the much more insidious suppression accomplished by the film is not a missing scene of castration but the systematic and much more "natural"-seeming disappearance of blacks over the course of the film.

Griffith's film achieves its power to the extent that it does not appear to be an exhortation to race hatred, but a natural process of heroic rescue that, in the process, just "happens" to wash the screen "clean." Even without the depiction of Gus's castration, members of the black audience understood what the film was saying and returned the sentiment. William Walker, a black man who saw the film in a black theater in 1916, recalls as quoted in the epigraph, "Some people were crying. You could hear people saying God . . . You had the worse feeling in the world. You just felt like you were not counted. You were out of existence." Walker does not explain how the film accomplished his sense of eradication, of being "out of existence," but I would submit that it had more to do with the visceral experience of the logic of black disappearance than specific instances of white-on-black violence or even of more explicit depictions of black men attacking white women. Walker seems to have recognized that what he had seen spelled the end of his very representation in any but the most servile or villainous roles in the new medium being born. Indeed, his further reaction extends the logic of his having been made invisible: "I just felt like . . . I wished somebody could not see me so I could kill them. I just felt like killing all the white people in the world."[50]

Griffith's film, which would be used as a recruiting tool by the Clan later in the decade, sparked a vigorous campaign by the NAACP to have it banned. Though the campaign ultimately did not succeed, the film was in fact banned in eighteen states and numerous cities and the campaign did bring about some cuts. However, for every mayor who banned the film out of respect for blacks or a desire to keep the peace, there were, as Jane Gaines tells us, others who did so for its depiction of interracial sex (Gaines 2000). One thing is clear, however: Griffith's film was more incendiary, more racially hateful in its consequences, more likely to produce the phenomenon of race riot (which more often than not meant white's attacking blacks) than Dixon's novels and play. But the reason may not only lie in the greater lust of his Lynch or the greater violence of missing sequences. At a deeper level its effectiveness as race hatred, its ability to make William Walker impotently despair of ever being counted and to resolve that the only possibly effective reaction would be, like Tillman, to "kill! kill! kill!" in turn lies in Griffith's greater

willingness to deploy the familiar features of the Tom material. For it was Griffith, not Dixon, who ultimately created the most effective counter to the Tom story. He did so, not by writing the sequel to the stories of Simon Legree and George (Harry) Harris, but by refunctioning the enormous emotional appeal of the antebellum story of the old South into a new kind of racial melodrama. As we have seen, this refunctioning occurs in many ways: in the redeployment of the icon of the cabin and the architecture of the good home; in the rewriting of Tom and Chloe into the much more subsidiary "faithful souls" of Mammy and Jake, whose own stories only matter insofar as they aid the white former masters; and in the displacement of evil sexual violence from Simon Legree onto the mulatto Silas Lynch. This last refunctioning, however, brings up a further twist involving the Gothic dimensions of both Tom and anti-Tom.

Ghosts in White Sheets

In Stowe's novel Simon Legree's mulatta concubines escape bondage by hiding in the garret of Legree's house. Legree fears the garret because he believes it is haunted by the ghost of a woman slave he once murdered there. Cassy and Emmeline exploit his superstitions by emitting strange, ghostlike noises and walking about under white sheets. Haunting in Stowe's novel is the ingenious means by which Cassy saves Emmeline from rape by Legree while also avenging Legree's murder of Tom.[51] While Eliza's sensational escape across the ice, occupying one paragraph in the novel, was included in most Tom shows—and considerably augmented with pursuing "bloodhounds" and added comic business (Marks and his umbrella)—Cassy and Emmeline's lengthily narrated escape-by-haunting was much less frequently depicted. It turns up, however, in the 1910 Vitagraph version of the film in which Cassy puts a sheet on Emmeline and Legree cowers in fear (Fig. 3.12).

Griffith refunctions Stowe's haunting to fit patriarchal, rather than maternal, goals in a scene that depicts the inspiration for the birth of the Clan. After the film has related a series of "outrages," including shoeless Negroes drinking and eating in the South Carolina State House, the passing of bills providing for the intermarriage of blacks and whites, and black representatives leering at white women in the gallery, Ben is pictured high on the bank of a river "in agony of soul over the degradation and ruin of his people." At that moment he spies two white children hiding themselves from their black playmates under a white sheet. When the laughing black children suddenly see movement under the sheet they run away in fear. A title reads, "The inspiration," and Ben rises with an "aha!" look in his eyes.

Figure 3.12 The haunting of the superstitious Legree. (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Vitagraph, 1910)

This seemingly innocent scene replaces the more elaborate invention of transposed Scottish Rites in Dixon with a simple "recognition" of the superstitious simplicity of childlike blacks (played, moreover, by "cute" black children). Out of a Stowe-like scene of apparent interracial amity, Griffith naturalizes the birth of the Clan, and by extension the "birth of the nation." By downplaying the superstitious, semi-pagan, totemic Christian ritual of Dixon's novels and play, he makes the Clan seem a very spontaneous, red-blooded American institution, motivated by the natural superstition of Negroes. Subsequent scenes of Clan members who need only show themselves to quaking Negroes to make them disappear reveal the apparent naturalness of white supremacy.

Stowe's white-sheeted haunting of Legree activated the power of the black female haunter against the white male haunted. Her female slaves deployed white guilt to make the slave owner cower. Griffith's refunctioning of the white sheet reverses the races of haunter and haunted. Vulnerability to superstition is now attributed to blacks and with it comes the notion of their proper childlike servility. Stowe, it seems, would forgive Legree his sins as long as he trembled before this specter of feminine (and black) Christian power.[52] Griffith, it seems, would forgive the former slaves—as Dixon would not—as long as they too cowered before the newly configured specter of white male rule. Cower, cringe, and disappear is what they would continue to do in the subsequent history of mainstream cinema until long after the civil rights movement took up the struggle for more equitable representations.

Escape and Rescue

The contrast between Stowe's use of ghosts in white sheets to achieve her female characters' escape from bondage and Griffith's use of those same ghosts in white sheets to wreak revenge and effect rescue points to a crucial structural difference between the two racial melodramas. The Tom story combines the pathos of black bondage and the action of black escape. The anti-Tom story, in contrast, combines the pathos of white female "bondage" to the black man and the action of white rescue. The failed rescue of Flora by Ben prepares the multiple rescues of white women from black men that follow. We have seen how Stowe importantly reversed the usual gender conventions of the slave narrative, feminizing the freedom narrative and masculinizing the bondage narrative, reenergizing what had already become, by 1852, stale melodramatic conventions. Escape offers exciting action and the Tom story's popular appeal on the stage had much to do with its initial exciting escape of Eliza, and the later escape of her entire family from slave catchers. Escape, however, is an action involving only two elements—pursuer and pursued.

Rescue, on the other hand, offers a potential three-way alternation between the endangered person, the entrapper (or pursuer), and the rescuer. When depicted in the alternating back-and-forth rhythms of an edited film, the dual elements of escape prove less dynamic and exciting than the triple elements of rescue. The possibilities for suspenseful prolongation of the action, as Griffith had developed in his years at Biograph, and then most memorably in *The Birth of a Nation*,[53] were inherently more melodramatic in the case of rescue because they offered not only escape's action of getting out of a bad place but rescue's possibility, as demonstrated in the "homecoming" "Parade of the Clan," of returning to the good place. For African slaves, especially, escape has posed the perpetual problem of what to escape *to*. Some of the variant stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seem to have acknowledged this when they had Eliza recaptured soon after her escape, sold back into slavery along with Tom to Legree, so that she may be rescued at the end by the good master George Shelby, Jr., and taken "home."[54] We have also seen the problem this lack of home posed to George Harris in the novel as he tried to propose a "mother" African homeland in a place he had never known. The fallback position for many a Tom show was, as we have seen, for Kentucky to continue to function as that good home. Escape, then, does not as easily

further the inherent melodramatic need to get back, literally or in some felt way, to the original "space of innocence" as rescue does, since escape is not intrinsically a nostalgic movement of return but a movement away from a known evil to a hoped for, but not necessarily known, better place.

Coda: A Post-Griffith Tom Show

Rescue wins out as the more exciting action in black and white racial melodrama because it provides more suspense and because it is more secure about the moral legibility of its home "space of innocence." Given the dominance of the form and content of this new racial melodrama, feeding as it did upon the preexisting appeal and dominance of the "wonderful 'leaping' fish" that was Uncle Tom, it is interesting to consider what happens to the "Tom show" of bondage and escape when it is revived in the twenties, now under the influence of Griffith's famous "multiple rescue operations." In what must be considered the last of the truly important film versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a two-million-dollar 1927 Universal silent film (Fig. 3.13)—we have an opportunity to observe the influence of Griffith's anti-Tom film on the Tom material "itself."

Director Harry Pollard originally hired Charles Gilpin, a black actor of some repute who had played the lead in *The Emperor Jones* on Broadway, for the role of Tom. According to most reports, Pollard, who had once played Tom in blackface himself, reportedly ordered Gilpin to be meek and submissive in his interpretation.[55] Gilpin was apparently disgusted by the order and finally refused the part (Gossett 1985, 384). Despite these difficulties, the black actor James B. Lowe, who was both younger and stronger than any previous stage or film Tom, offered a very dignified and moving interpretation in a film that was the sixth most popular film at the box office in 1927 (Koszarski 1990, 33). Lowe was the first black actor to actually be promoted by a Hollywood studio in a noncomic starring role, and his presence in the film was highly significant to the black community, taken as a counter to the dominant negrophobia established by Griffith and Dixon.

However, neither the undeniable popularity of a film that was relatively faithful to the Aiken-Howard version of its Tom story, nor the innovative vigor of its black—rather than blackface—Tom, could counter the deeper sense in which, for all its negrophilia, this Tom story was now taking its lessons in melodramatic pathos and action as much from Stowe as from Griffith. A long beginning section idealizes the Shelby plantation in an elaborate marriage ceremony of George and Eliza that is every bit as romanticized and prolonged as Griffith's leisurely depiction of the "quaintly" ways of the South. The sequence establishes the goodness and innocence of these light-skinned slave protagonists (and by extension, how "almost" like white folks they are, as one

Figure 3.13 Poster for the 1927 film, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, directed by Harry Pollard. (Courtesy Harriet Beecher Stowe Foundation, Hartford, Conn.)

woman slave observes in the film). Soon, however, George Shelby sells Eliza's son Harry, forcing Eliza to make her escape. But here, the traditional iconography of the self-propelled flight of the bondswoman with the hounds nipping at her heels is inflected by the now much more influential rescue of the maiden in distress rendered so exciting, not only in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* but in the rescue-from-the-ice of *Way Down East* (1920) (Fig. 1.3). Instead of making her own way to freedom with Phineas Fletcher watching from the far shore, as in Stowe and Aiken-Howard (see Fig. 2.13), Eliza here acts more like the helpless Anna of *Way Down East*. Trapped on an ice floe in the midst of a Niagara-like torrent, about to be swept over the waterfall, this 1927 Eliza is rescued in the nick of time by the kindly Quaker Phineas Fletcher, who hangs like a trapeze artist upside down from a tree branch extending over the precipice. *Way Down East*, which had borrowed the melodramatic topos of the heroine on the ice from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the first place, here gives back the lesson under Griffith's influence. Stowe's slave woman who saved herself has now become a Gish-like heroine in need of masculine rescue. In yet another debt to Griffith, Pollard's film has Simon Legree played by George Siegman, the same actor who had played Silas Lynch (with only sightly swarthier skin) in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Pollard's film has learned its lesson from Griffith so well that it even has Eliza promptly recaptured so that she might be rescued a second time. According to the logic of its narrative, this second rescue should be accomplished by the efforts of another heroic male. Indeed, the film appears to set up just such a rescue by Eliza's husband, George. Improbably acting as a sort of camp follower of the Union army as it cuts its way through the South, George and little son Harry are searching for Eliza when they and the army happen upon Legree's plantation. Hearing Eliza scream when caught in the clutches of Legree, George begins to go to her rescue. But lest he enact the same kind of black-on-white violence we saw at the end of the 1914 film version of Uncle Tom discussed at the end of the last chapter, Pollard's film redeploys the motif of ghosts in an entirely new way. This time Uncle Tom's ghost diverts Legree from a struggle with Cassy and Eliza and lures him to his doom. In yet another twist on Stowe's motif of haunting, a superimposed shirtless apparition of Tom appears to a guilty and terrified Legree, preventing him from carrying out his sexual designs on Eliza and from killing Cassy. Pursuing the disembodied image, Legree plunges out a window to his death just as the army and George, who now does not need to carry out his own Clan-like rescue, arrive.

Pollard's version of Uncle Tom thus appears stranded halfway between the Tom story of escape and the Griffith story of rescue. Neither granting the power of heroic rescue to George, nor the power of escape to Cassy and Eliza, it nevertheless grants the ghost of the martyred Tom the power to haunt the guilty white villain. Instead of the ghostly white-sheeted Clan, the literal ghost

of Tom saves Eliza from an encounter with "a fate worse than death." In the 1958 sound reissue of the same film, a prologue and voice-over sound track were added. Raymond Massey, the craggy-faced actor who had famously played Lincoln in the 1939 *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, appears as himself in a prologue that, somewhat condescendingly, introduces the "classic" story. His voice then narrates and interprets it rather than letting the silent images speak for themselves. The effect is to replace what was left of Stowe's maternal voice with the paternal voice of the man she called "Father Abraham."[56] It is as if Abe Lincoln were narrating the novel from the perspective of post–Emancipation Proclamation moral certainty. What was once a maternal melodrama of female escape and male bondage fighting slavery has, by the time of this late reissue, and under the very influence of *The Birth of a Nation*, become a paternal melodrama of female bondage and rescue. However, what rescues Eliza is not the action of her heroic slave husband but a combination of the event of the Civil War and the moral ghost of Uncle Tom, both of which reassure viewers of slavery's historical happy end.

In 1927 the Tom show was not altogether dead as a force in American culture. It was still capable of generating sympathy for suffering blacks and, as we shall see in the next chapter, its romantic racialism would in that same year be put to new uses in the appropriation of black virtue by white performers in blackface. But now that cinema had become the dynamic, exciting medium where the moral legibility of race was played out, the Tom show adapted to the exigencies of the new medium. There is no greater example of the power of Griffith's refunctioning than this post-Griffith cinematic "Tom show." In the confluence of traditions this chapter has been tracing, the negrophilia of the Tom melodrama was overturned by the negrophobia of anti-Tom. White women became the victim-heroes of black lust and white men were empowered to accomplish their rescue. We have seen, however, that these two traditions, so antithetical in their racial sympathies, are deeply implicated in one another. Just as the architecture of Griffith's film was based on the theatrical traditions of the Tom show, so any new cinematic attempt to present the Tom tradition after Griffith had to build on the architecture of the good southern home and the excitement of a last-minute rescue.