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Reconstructing Whiteness in Ambrose Bierce

A Thesis

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By

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Introduction:

America at the End of Reconstruction

> To accept one's past – one's history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.
>
> — James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Critical inquiry into the works of American author, journalist, and Civil War veteran Ambrose Bierce has been largely reserved to a small cadre of scholars or a select few works, such as his oft-anthologized "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge." Yet, Bierce produced a diverse, expansive, and highly engaging body of literature, journalism, and satire that more than merits scholarly attention. Writing during the tumultuous end of the 19th century, Bierce lived not only through the Civil War but also a revolution in industry, technology, and transportation; the assassination of two American presidents; and a new formulation of racial and class hierarchies after the failure of Radical Reconstruction. Bierce's body of work spans genres and offers a particularly salient perspective on the often conflicting (re)construction of American whiteness in the post-bellum period. Analysis of Bierce's work helps to both clarify the dominant middle-class construction of white-identity at the turn of the century, while also offering pointed departures that complicate easy assumptions about white ideological and cultural hegemony during the period.

Theoretically this project is both scaffolded-by and in-conversation with a body of scholarship typically referred to as 'whiteness studies,' which in many ways comes from a tradition begun by the eminent black thinker, historian, and socialist W.E.B. Du Bois. Throughout his career Du Bois not only concerned himself with exploring and theorizing the

lives and experiences of the black community in America, but also those of the white community. He demonstrated the ways in which blackness and whiteness are intimately interwoven within the nation's class system. In his famous essay "The Souls of White Folk," Du Bois states:

> None there are that puzzle me more than the souls of White Folk. Not, mind you, the souls of them that are white, but souls of them that have become painfully conscious of their whiteness; those in whose minds the paleness of their bodily skins is fraught with tremendous and eternal significance. ("Souls" 298)

Following Du Bois, a litany of thinkers have attempted to piece together the puzzling framework upon which this fraught paleness has constructed itself. Scholars and historians in the field have worked to uncover the hidden markers of white identity that are obfuscated by the normalizing sway whiteness has over American cultural production. Notable in the field are the works of James Baldwin, David R. Roediger, T.W. Allen, Toni Morrison, John Hartigan, and, of course, Du Bois himself. The proposed goal whiteness studies is to demonstrate the ways in which white-supremacy permeates and informs American culture, make visible otherwise covert structures of racism, and, thereby, support a project of dismantling racial inequality.

In his seminal work, *The Invention of the White Race*, T.W. Allen lays out the central historical guide and theoretical basis for my thesis: namely, that "whiteness" as a concept and means of social control was the prerequisite for the establishment of the American racial caste system. The peculiarity of America's "peculiar institution" first arose in the Virginia colony because of an inability to secure and exploit an adequate work force for the colony's labor intensive tobacco monoculture. The planter elite turned instead to, "European workers as basic plantation workers" (Allen 12), and as late as the early 1700's both Europeans and Africans were

employed as chattel bond laborers. The result created, "solidarity of European-American and African-American bond laborers" (161) who resisted the planter elite and led to a tactical shift towards a racial system of labor control. Revolts against the planters by coalitions of European and African bond-laborers, such as the famous Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, helped build a consensus among the ruling class of the efficacy of separating the interests of these social groups. "Whiteness" developed as a legal and social status that defended Europeans from enslavement and offered them work subjugating African bond laborers in order to create a class buffer between the wealthy colonial planters and the enslaved labor force. Allen describes the process as, "an investment in social control at the expense of immediate profits" (137). The legal construction of whiteness or the white-race also fit squarely with concurrently developed ideologies promulgated by both philosophy and religion that denied equal humanity to non-Christians, deprived women of basic rights, and promoted the general deficiency of non-European cultures. Allen also draws attention to the fact that the success of establishing race-based slavery involved, "special pains," on the part of the planters to educate poor whites, "in the moral and legal ethos of white-supremacism" (251) through an active propaganda campaign.

The American Civil War was in part a contest between the industrial bourgeoisie and the planter elite over which mode of capitalist production and class relations would dominate the United States. By the end of the conflict, abolitionist sentiment and "free labor" ideology had gained a powerful foothold in the consciousness of Northerners across classes. This pathed the way for Radical Reconstruction and a chance to rebuild the South on terms of black equality. In his foundational account of this period, *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois eloquently describes the brief period after the war as a, "sudden wave of glory that rose and burst above four million people, and of the echoing shout that brought joy to four hundred thousand fellows of African

blood in the North" (98). For a period, there was genuine opportunity, through joint struggle, to cast away once and for all white-supremacy.

However, the planter elite though militarily defeated was not prepared to secede white-supremacy, and a system of terror in the form of the Klu Klux Klan arose in the South aimed at destroying the gains freed blacks. Southern elites began a concerted effort to intimidate freed blacks and their white Republican allies that reached a fever point in the horrendous lynching campaigns of '68-71. Poor white Southerners, so long accustomed to slavery and now engaged in a labor competition with freed slaves, joined the effort. Furthermore, many Northern industrialist, content with their victory over the economic system of slavery, felt little obligation to pursue a system of full equality in the South. A liberal Republican ideology promoting, "classical financial liberalism" and "laissez-fair government," made up primarily of, "middle-class and well educated" reformers, "fearful of class conflict, and determined to curb what they perceived as the dangers of mass politics and universal suffrage" began gaining power in the North (Blight 123). By the late 1870's Radical Reconstruction had been usurped by a social and economic project designed to fully bring a "New South" into the fold of industrial capitalism which was happy to repurpose the social control mechanism of white-supremacy. Allen states that:

> The bourgeoisie as a whole, drawing upon practices that had ante-bellum roots, opted for what we may term White Reconstruction, that is, the re-establishment of the social control system of racial oppression, based on racial privileges for laboring-class 'whites' with regard to 'free' land, immigration, and industrial employment. (145)

By the turn of the century the rise of Jim Crow laws legally codified White Reconstruction and the racial control system was once again relatively stabilized. Though reliant upon the historical,

legal, and economic analysis provided by Allen, Du Bois and others, this project will focus instead upon the simultaneous cultural and ideological work being done to help buttress this new system of racial oppression. Due to the content analyzed, primarily late 19th century literature and journalism, the ideological project observed here largely reflects the battle in the minds of white middle -class Americans, and especially Northerners.

The literary culture in which Bierce is situated reflects the coalescing of a new ideas among the middle-class and the bourgeoisie concerning labor, race, and democratic society as a whole. While American's were still in the midst of processing the results of the Civil War the working class across the globe was in the midst of a period of unrivaled struggle. At the turn of the century strike waves rocked the US, and in Europe revolutionary socialist labor movements were taking on a mass character. In the American context, the most significant was the Great Strike of 1877, which Eric Foner, in his tomb on labor relations of the era, *Reconstruction American's Unfinished Revolution*, called "one of the bitterest explosions of class warfare in American history" (583). A populist agrarian movement also sprang up in this era which had to juggle the often regionally conflicting racial antipathies of its mostly white constituency. The literature of the period can be seen as a response and attempt to pacify these as well as racial antagonisms. By the last two decades of the 19th century, the memory of Radical Reconstruction had faded and instead white readers and writers were escaping into a popular literature purporting to resolve racial antipathy and one which, "could bridge the chasm of class conflict and social unrest" (Silber 106). The discourse of this literature combined with the rising pseudo-science of eugenics to create a fresh cultural understanding of whiteness that was simultaneously being legally codified under Jim Crow in the South.

In part due to the relative dearth of Bierce's scholarship, little has been done to investigate his relationship with coalescing race-class ideology during his lifetime. As such, his vantage provides a refreshing look into the ideological process taking place in literature – a literature engaged in a project to reconstruct whiteness and stabilize certain "shared" white-identities among bourgeoisie, middle class America. Writing in across genres and formats, Bierce can be simultaneously placed within multiple conversations concerning the trajectory of writing in the period. As a Union veteran writing war fiction, Bierce's distinct departure from the tropes of this genre help complicate narratives of homogenous Northern white ideology. While Bierce's horror fiction fits snuggly into the tradition of the American gothic and its characteristic erasing of black bodies as a reflection of white racial anxiety. Together the two present a distinctly "Biercian" conception of white-identity, and the process of working through this Biercian whiteness helps to clarify other dominant literary constructions of whiteness circulating in the late 19th century. At the same time, however, Bierce spent most of his adult life in the West (San Francisco), working as a journalist. From this vantage point an understanding of Bierce and his relationship to bourgeoisie whiteness is complicated by his lifelong crusade against California's political corruption, his (relatively) famous battle against the barons of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and his lesser-known defense of Chinese immigrant workers against white Christians in San Francisco. Bierce's San Francisco career adds the dimension of the West in the often oversimplified North-South analysis of American culture following the war, and the frequently overlooked role Chinese migrants played during the rise of "free labor" ideology.

The project that follows divides itself into three primary sections along these lines: 1) Bierce's writings on the Civil War, 2) his horror and fantasy writing, and 3) his career as an editor and journalist. Though the demarcations are in part based upon genre, they also provide a

useful chronological starting point, Bierce's service, and a progression that compounds the identities at play – starting with the dialogue among whites about remembering the war, adding in the dimension of blackness as an inexorable but hidden trope within the genre of American gothic, and finally, including the aforementioned presence of racialized Chinese labor as a point of contrast to white identity, specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The first section argues that Bierce's output of Civil War writing is best contextualized as a confrontation with and departure from the dominant narratives of the conflict. In his analysis of post-bellum cultural remembering *Race and Reunion*, David Blight describes the era's military fiction and nonfiction as a, "literature of reunion," (211) which, broadly, attempted to sterilize and romanticize the conflict with the aim of reuniting the country on an apolitical notion of "shared struggle". These narratives – best exemplified by the *Century Magazine*'s wildly popular *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* and Ulysses S. Grant's bestselling *Personal Memoirs* – dealt largely with abstract troop movements and tactical maneuvers while framing the war as an honorable, noble conflict on both sides. Bierce's writing rejects the polished narrative of his contemporaries and instead creates a morbid surrealism that addresses the corporeal and psychological trauma faced by combatants. Blight writes, "Relentlessly Bierce's target was Civil War sentiment and romance," describing his work as, "a quest to expose pretense, to uncover the horror and ludicrousness of war from the soldiers' point of view" (247). Bierce's war-writing is by far his most studied and appreciated contribution to literature, and academics have placed Bierce as forerunner of contemporary war fiction in conversation with modernist notions of subjectivity. Using the work of these scholars, this section asks what racial consequences Bierce's counter narrative has for the contested memory of the Civil War, and in doing so, provides an incomplete picture of the whiteness as understood by Bierce.

Acting as a bridge between Bierce's war writing and his horror writing, the project will briefly detour through the second dominant form of reunion literature, characterized by "Lost Cause" and "Old South" plantation romances. Plantation romances lamented the loss of the slave aristocracy and turned the battlefield into a space for the tragic death of white Southern patriarchy. Often narrated from the perspective of the loyal slave, such as in Thomas Nelson Page's archetypical *In Ole Virginia*, the black voice is, perversely, used to extol the virtues of the planter class. Though never his direct target, Bierce's literary campaign against Civil War romance and rank sentimentality counterpoises central components of "Old South" and "Lost Cause" narratives. However, Bierce fails to adequately offer any ideological counter to the racist conceptions of slaves and freed blacks central to the plantation romance. Instead, he typically chooses to avoid directly confronting blackness in his works. This conspicuous absence has a direct lineage with the Gothic tradition of writers like Poe and Hawthorne whose works, on a surface level, elide confrontation with black-identities while simultaneously, on an interior level, reflect American social anxiety concerning slavery.

The second part of the project excavates the presence of blackness in Bierce's works and relates them to central of anxieties around white identity nascent in Bierce's horror fiction. The section relates Bierce's horror fiction structurally and generically to early 19th century American romanticism and finds its theoretical basis in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. In the text, Morrison argues that blackness is not an accidental characteristic of the literary production of early America, but in fact the essential quality, a "darkness from which our early literature seemed unable to extricate itself" (33). Morrison's analytical framework unearths the white literary bourgeoisie's conceptions blackness hidden within the genre of American romance and gothic. Bierce's horror stories transport their characters into a dim, atmospheric world and

revolve around tropes of mistaken identity, pseudo-scientific specters, and trademark twist endings. Like other early American modernists, Bierce investigates the instability in notions of time, place, and self that characterized a society alienated and dislocated by the second industrial revolution. These stories also carry on the tradition of antebellum Gothic literature and their system of racial coding, but recast this coding within the context of post-reconstruction America. The result clarifies some of Bierce's racial anxieties that are often absent in analysis of his military writing, and it acts as a type of negative-image to the picture presented by his rebellion against Civil War reunion narratives.

The project's final section will depart from more traditionally construed objects of literary scholarship, and turn instead to Bierce's work as a journalist. Writing primarily in San Francisco, Bierce as a journalist, editor, and columnist earned a reputation for biting criticisms of government, politics, and much of the day's literary establishment. San Francisco in the 1880's and 1890's was a hot bed for political corruption and collusion with industrial capitalists. California elites were facing resistance by an exploding labor movement, and often turned to the whipping-up of anti-Chinese sentiment to displace the conflict. The work of scholars like Lisa Lowe, Edlie L. Wong, and Moon Ho-Jung demonstrate how the racialization of Chinese migrants developed in a distinctly different way from that of the black African in colonial America. Because the semi-indentured Chinese worker never morphed into an entirely chattel-based form of labor its racialization – embodied in the pejorative "coolie" – always occurred in the context of "free labor" and alongside free white workers. After reconstruction, the plight of the Chinese migrant and emancipated blacks are intertwined as methods of racial exclusion originally designed to answer the "Chinese Question" are applied to the "Negro Problem." Incorporating Bierce's localized writing as a Californian journalist helps to broaden the

geographic scope of this project. It also helps demonstrate the ways in which whiteness –
predicated as a system of legal, political, and cultural exclusions – lacks a settled or homogenous
definition but is instead in a continual process of (re)constructing itself. Exploring these works
also opens avenues for exploring the real, often contradictory, political opinions that inform his
literature. By inspecting Bierce's nonfiction career and resolving some of the apparent
contradictions of his politics – specifically his relationship with the working class and Chinese
migrants – clarifies important fundamental dispositions the author had in relation to the rapidly
changing nature of society through the second industrial revolution. These dispositions then
provide a frame in which to understand the previous analysis and come to a full image of
Bierce's ideological construction of whiteness.

The strengths of this project lie in the breadth of genres it explores, the originality of its
analysis of Bierce, and its transcontinental and cross-racial frameworks for understanding
whiteness. The weaknesses of the project lay first in some of the general weaknesses of the field
of whiteness studies. Though an effective tool, the term "whiteness" can also lead to an
unspecific and uncritical assessment of the entirety of the white population. John Hartigan, in his
wonderful contribution to the field, *Odd Tribes*, reminds us, "there are important class
dimensions to whiteness and that whites are not uniformly privileged and powerful" (2). This
may seem like an obvious consideration, but because whiteness often has such flexibility in its
usage, it is often all too easy homogenize the supposed privileges of whiteness that are never
equally distributed, and sometimes never distributed, across class lines. This project attempts to
address specifically the class interests that inform the vision of whiteness at play in each of its
given contexts. Secondly, the entirety of this project lacks an adequate account of gender and
sexuality in its analysis of Bierce. Again, Bierce's relationship to gender and sexuality is

woefully unstudied. Though, this project does engage with gendered and sexualized ideas, on occasion, by and large it has chosen to refrain from an analysis in order to avoid making unhelpful assessments. As a note, Nina Silber's truly phenomenal work, *Romance and Reunion*, to which so much of this project is indebted too, is an essential guide for understanding the gendered aspect of much of what this paper grapples with. Keeping these considerations in mind, what follows will be a broad exploration of Bierce's literary career. A project which embarks upon a cross-racial, transcontinental journey, "through endless miles in the dangerous wilderness of American racial thought" (Blight 102), and on the way adds clarity to our understanding of a literary project that accompanied the reestablishment of white-supremacy after the revolutionary gains of the Civil War and Radical Reconstruction.

Such a Tale as May Be Told by a Soldier:

Bierce's War Fiction

> If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.
>
> — Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

The above sentiment from author Tim O'Brien – a Vietnam veteran and perhaps the most adept and widely read war writer of the contemporary moment – proffers a simple, and culturally familiar, enunciation of a theory of war writing that at the turn of the 19th century was entirely foreign to the public. The ravages of the World Wars, failure in Korea, the tragic disaster that is the War on Terror, and, perhaps above all, the active disdain and rebellion against the Vietnam War have created a variety of writing in this and the previous century that understands that modern warfare is a bloody, brutal, and, often, meaningless affair. This is not to dismiss the tenacious persistence of a certain codes of military virtue – honor, manhood, and duty to one's nation – but only to observe that these virtues exist alongside an opposite narrative presented by writers like O'Brien. Indeed, O'Brien's career is perhaps exemplary of modern consciousness around "war fiction". This, however, is not the world Ambrose Bierce found himself in when he resolved to put his pen to paper and create his Civil War writings. Bierce instead found himself in nation engaged in a struggle over the memory of the Civil War, which, in print, was being won by a narrative that diminished the conflict through sentimentality.

By the 1880's the ambitious, emancipatory project of Radical Reconstruction had largely been lost and newly freed Southern blacks had been abandoned to a campaign of terror, segregation, and the rebuilding of the white master class. Capitalist elites in both the North and South were attempting to politically reunite the nation, and, in order to shore-up reunion, a project of collective amnesia was being promoted. As veterans aged, a culture of Civil War sentimentality began to emerge that would help facilitate the process of reconciliation. A cottage industry of veteran memoirs, battle accounts, and war histories flushed the market. These literatures, led, not exclusively but largely, by bourgeois Northern generals contained sterilized accounts of battle saturated with romantic notions of soldierly bravery which served to obfuscate the tremendous human loss of the war. In the process they projected a vision of whiteness that was united by a "shared struggle" which ignored the political stakes of Southern succession and slavery. Rejecting this sentimentality, Ambrose Bierce chose to present a vision of the Civil War rooted in the perspective of soldiers participating in a morbidly surreal conflict led by bumbling and vain commanders. His war fiction challenges the dominant patriotic narratives popular at the turn of the century which were imbedded in a project of reconstructing white-supremacy through North-South cooperation and white racial unity. The section that follows first lays out the centrality that Bierce's war experience had not only in his fiction, but for most of his life. Departing from Bierce's biography, the argument then treks through a brief history of the post-war period and its accompanying literature. Then by juxtaposing Bierce's military writing with his contemporaries, the contours of the ideologies underpinning both are clarified. Finally, the finally it ends by noting that neither Bierce nor his contemporaries adequately address black personhood in their accounts of the war, which directs the project to Bierce's horror fiction in order to investigate the consequences of this absence for the writer's racial ideologies.

Scholarly consensus identifies Bierce's service in the Civil War as, unsurprisingly, the most significant and formative period in his life. Bierce was born and raised by a family of devout abolitionists in western Indiana. Bierce's uncle, Lucius Bierce was a former general and compatriot of John Brown – Lucius supplied Brown with the infamous broad swords used in his bloody campaign in Franklin County, Kansas. Lucius nurtured abolitionist and military sentiments in young Bierce which likely led to his nephew's early enlistment. At barely 18 years of age and only four days after Lincoln's call for volunteers, Bierce became the first in his home country to enlist in the 9th Indiana Infantry Regiment. This would begin a military career lasting for all of the Civil War, and for a brief stint beyond, ending in '67. Bierce and the Indiana 9th were involved in nearly every major conflict in the Western Theater - Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Murfreesboro, Franklin, Nashville, and Shiloh. During his service Bierce would earn the rank of first lieutenant, obtain 15 different commendations for bravery under fire, and receive the distinct honor of a grievous head wound at the battle of Kennesaw Mountain which would plague him with dizzy spells for his entire life. It was in this period that Bierce would first develop the morose, cynical nature that most, beyond his closest confidants, would come to know him by.

Historians and scholars studying Bierce identify a morbid obsession with death in all of his writing and note his often flippant handling of the topic – he famously kept a skull on his desk for the purposes of comedy. In his classic survey of Civil War literature, Edmond Wilson, writes, "death itself is Bierce's favorite character," (623) and suggests that Death is perhaps his only character. Undoubtedly it was during the bloodshed of his military service that Bierce first became a close companion with and began his musings upon death. Beyond firsthand participation with many of the Civil War's bloodiest battles, Bierce twice had the unfortunate

pleasure of overseeing a military execution which was likely the inspiration for his famous "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" wherein he opines, "Death is a dignitary, who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him" (*Tales* 12). Though a trove of Bierce correspondence still exits, the majority is from his later life and almost none exists from his military service. In a rare piece, a pinning love letter to a young Clara Wright back in Indiana, one can see the marked impression death had made upon Bierce even in the first year of the war. "I hardly expect ever to see you again, and perhaps it is better so," Bierce writes, "every day someone is struck down who is so much better than I" (*A Much Misunderstood* 1). In the letter Bierce estimates that nearly a third of his brigade have been killed or wounded since leaving Cleveland, Tennessee – likely at the Battle of Missionary Ridge that November. Young Bierce ensures Clara, that, "my turn will come in time" (1). Bierce of course was wrong and he survived to see Appomattox, unlike the roughly 300,000 Union dead at the close of the war. This death wish, born in the autumn of '63, would linger and catalyze into the cynical taciturn style that defined Bierce's fifty-year writing career. A career dedicated to, "rejecting the comfortable hypocrisies and spirit-killing compromises that enabled his countrymen to live with themselves" (Morris 5), and earned him the moniker "Bitter Bierce." "Life is no better than death," Bierce mused in 1911, only a few years before his mysterious disappearance in the Mexican wilderness, unfortunately, "it is longer" (*Unabridged* 186).

Following the war Bierce lived for a stint abroad before returning to the States in 1875 and settling in San Francisco where he would began his literary and journalistic career in earnest. Notably, the period between '64 and '75 largely lacked any sustained or serious production of Civil War literature. Beyond a few notable exceptions – Melville's *Battle Pieces*, De Forest's *Miss Racenel's Conversion*, Lanier's *Tiger Lilies* – most authors of the Reconstruction era

seemed unable to yet process the war in manner suitable for print. However, by the time Bierce

began publishing his war fiction in the 1890's the country was in the midst of an explosive

period of war writing and memorialization. Inaugurated by the publication of William Tecumseh

Sherman's *Memoirs* in 1875, a tidal wave of military memoirs, war histories, and battle accounts

would flood the marketplace in the 80's and 90's in what has been dubbed the "literature of

reunion" (Blight 211). Marked by sentiment and sterilization, the literature of reunion flourished

in a white middle-class print culture hungry for sectional resolution; these works would be

essential players in the attempt to finally settle the legacy of the Civil War so hotly contested

during the Reconstruction.

In, *Race and Reunion,* David Blight crucially displays the three dominant memories of

the war that emerged in the second half of the 19th century. These modes of reminiscence, writes

Blight, "collided and combined over time" (2) in an attempt to settle definitively the legacy of

the conflict. Blight describes the three as follows:

> The reconciliationist vision, which took root in the process of dealing with the dead from
>
> so many battlefields, prisons, and hospitals … the white supremacist vision, which took
>
> many forms early, including terror and violence, locked arms with reconciliations of
>
> many kinds, and by the turn of the century delivered the country a segregated memory of
>
> its Civil War on Southern terms; and three, the emancipationist vision, embodied in
>
> African Americans' complex remembrance of their own freedom, in the politics of the
>
> republic and the liberation of blacks to citizenship and Constitutional equality. (Blight 2)

The contested election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876 and the subsequent withdrawal of federal

troops from the South marked the end of the Reconstruction period, the triumph of a campaign of

exclusion and terror on Southern blacks, and the re-ascendancy of the white planter class in a

coalition with Northern capitalists. By 1880 the emancipatory vision of the abolitionists, Radical

Republicans, and, most importantly, the newly freed blacks in the South had begun to fade from

the popular consciousness of white Americans. In its place a new memory was emerging that

denied the revolutionary potential of the Black Reconstruction and elided the deep political

divide at the root of the slavocracy's secession.

      In the 1880's aging veterans were steadily joining associations like the Grand Army of

the Republic, monuments honoring the fallen dead and the war's generals cropped-up across the

nation, and a cottage industry of Civil War writing thrived. These processes of memorialization

became spaces to contest the memory of the Civil War. The conciliatory mood that came to

dominate the minds white Americans at the turn of the century was facilitated by three major

powers: first the capitalist giants of the North who recognized the mutual benefit of

industrializing the "New South" and feared the racial unity of labor; secondly, a political elite

constituted by the former planter class that used terror, intimidation, and segregation to roll back

the gains of reconstruction in the South; and finally, petty bourgeois or middle-class editors and

publishers ready to seize on a market demand for Civil War narratives that crossed sectional

divides. William E. Finck, a Democrat from Ohio, stated before Congress in 1866 that, "the

North and South are destined to live together as one people, in the same Union," and that the

nation as a whole should follow the, "noble example of our brave armies in the field, who, when

the conflict had ended no longer regarded the Southern people as enemies, but as friends" (Blight

52-53). Finck's statement is an exemplary demonstration of a few primary qualities of

reconciliationist rhetoric: the necessity and inevitability of national unity, the conflation of Union

and Confederate soldiers into a homogenous whole, and the conspicuous absence of blackness in

general but slavery especially. This vision of national unity, coupled with a de-individualized

and sanitized accounts of battle would dominate the written reflections of veterans throughout the 1880's and 90's.

Noting the success of Sherman's *Memoirs*, publishers, magazines, and newspapers began churning out Civil War literature at an alarming rate. Veterans, bolstered by the pride of monument ceremonies and the approaching ten- and fifteen-year anniversaries of the war, started pouring out accounts and regimental histories. Jumping on the bandwagon in 1880, the federal government released the first volume of what would become a massive 128 volume archive of orders, reports, casualty lists, and other official war documents, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of Union and Confederate Armies.* However, the two most popular, and emblematic examples of the period's literature were *Century* magazine's *Battles and leaders of the Civil War* and President Ulysses S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant.* Both, typified reunion literature and projected a vision of a costly conflict but one ultimately empty of any visceral accounts of bloodshed and which evaded real politics. In a plain and un-embossed style, these collections obsessed with the minutia of troop formations, battlefield movements, and a statistical accounting of the dead and wounded. The morals they extolled were pride in a masculine sense of duty, praise for heroic patriotism, shunning of cowardly behavior, and steadfastly loyalalty to the "cause." Of course the political character of the "cause" had been evacuated, and in its place an abstract concept of "shared struggle," based upon, "the mutual recounting and understanding of all soldiers' valor" had arisen (Blight 175).

In her essential contribution to the study of this period, *Romance and Reunion*, Nina Silber notes the decidedly middle-class character of these writings. The drive for reunion, motivated by the capitalist class and their politicians, was a very sympathetic message, "specifically to middle- and upper-class readers of the major magazines of the period" (Silber

11) whom were discomforted by an era marked by violent class conflict and the specter of a racially unified working class. The generals who authored the most popular works of reunion literature were themselves typically from the middle- and upper-classes who found the turn-of-the-century tumult so anxiety inducing. The popularity of these works projected into the minds of middle-class America a manufactured white identity rooted in heroic soldierly masculinity that embodied a desire for a united national whiteness powerful enough to supplant class and regional divides.

The most illustrative and popular demonstration of the war branch of reunion literature was the *Century* magazine's *Battles and Leaders*. The publishers at the Century Company were well aware of that not only Northerners, but also Southerners were hungry for war recollections. The accounts found in *Battles and Leaders* share a distinct vision of valor and bravery that acted as balm on sectional wounds. Union Major General Henry J. Hunt's account of Gettysburg is particularly illustrative of the genre. In an exhausting three part series, Hunt maps every regiment shift, troop movement, and tactical arrangement possible but almost never gives any notion whatsoever of the experience of the battle. Hunt after the logistical account provides an equally exhaustive statistical numbering of the casualties that were suffered – the poetry Hunt uses to recount the losses of the Civil War's deadliest day is quite touching, "the losses of both armies were very large" (Johnson 384). The account ends by assuring the reader that though the Confederates lost:

> Right gallantly did they act their part, and their failure carried no discredit with it. Their military honor was not tarnished by their defeat, nor their spirit lowered, but their respect for their opponents was restored. (Johnson 385)

The collection exhaustively covers the conflict as seen through the eyes of both Confederate and Union generals and officers. However, it avoids direct political confrontations and encouraged only minimal descriptions of bloodshed. Effectively, the memories within *Battles and Leaders* shifted the terms of the debate between the North and the South into a set of differing logistical, statistical, and strategic discrepancies. The tactic allowed for a vast array of writings to be produced and a culture of comradely debate to arise around them, while effectively removing any of the real consequences of each battle. Besides the *Century Series*, President Grant's *Personal Memoirs* were the next cornerstone of reunion literature.

Born into an unremarkable middle class family, Grant's meteoric rise from rank-less volunteer to lieutenant General of the Union Army to two-term President remains a formidable example of the "self-made-man" narrative; however, by the mid 1880's Grant had squandered his fortunes in bad business dealings and turned to the prospects of a memoir in the hopes of settling his finances. Originally commissioned by the Century Company, through the efforts of Mark Twain, who was certain of the memoir's future success and lauded the general's vividly clear writing, Grant was able to get a significantly better deal. Quietly suffering from throat cancer, Grant would work tirelessly on the novel, completing it in 11 months, and dying a week later in July of '85. Modest by nature and made even more so with his poor fortunes late in life, Grant figured 5,000 copies was an ambitious sales total. *Personal Memoirs* would sell over 300,000 copies in only two years and became a lauded piece of nonfiction in American history. "The thick pair of volumes," Wilson writes, "used to stand, like a solid attestation of the victory of the Union forces, on the shelves of every pro-Union home" (132). However, *Personal Memoirs*, in both style and sentiment, would also become exemplary of the discourse of reconciliation.

During the war Grant was an early proponent of abolition, and held a lifelong belief in the value of giving civil liberties to freed blacks. And, especially in the early years of his presidency, strove for such gains while also maintaining that reunion with the South must occur. Regardless of his good intentions, Grant's corrupt administration and tepid actions fumbled the Radical Reconstruction which would have dire effects on Southern blacks. By 1884 the old general would also articulate some of the most forgiving accounts of the war. "If the Lost Cause was born at Appomattox … surely the spirit of reunion was, in part, born there as well," (214) states Blight, and indeed Grant's account of Appomattox in *Personal Memoirs* is a hallmark of reconciliations thought. Grant writes that outside the court house that April, "the men of the two armies fraternized as if they had been fighting for the same cause" (quoted in Wilson 145). After Lee's formal surrender, as the Confederates began to march home, "not a cheer went up" among the Union forces, "not a remark was made that would give pain" (145) In earnest Grant states, "I believe there was a feeling of sadness just then in the breasts of most of the Union soldiers at seeing the dejection of their late antagonists" (145). Gone is the fear of the monstrous rebel; forgotten the General Lee who sent thousands to their death in the defense one of the world's most despicable institutions; absent any sign of the Black population who deserves a central role in this narrative so essential to their lives. The consequence these memories had on popular imagination is indispensable, as Blight writes, "here were the terms of the American reunion rendered in probably the most oft-read chapter of one of its best-selling works" (215). A team of generals representing both the Union and Confederacy would serve as pallbearers at Grants funeral; the passing of the great Union stalwart in such a manner illustrates how far the country – or at least a certain strata of the country – had come on the road to reunion.

Personal Memoirs, however, also promoted reconciliation in form by mimicking the sterilization of conflict and de-individualization of suffering so common in the works of the *Century Series*. For a man famously squeamish at the site of blood – he allegedly would refuse a steak if too undercooked – Grant's memoirs are some of the most stoic and detached accounts of the Civil War in print. Grant's intention is to deliver as clear and understandable account of every battle, writ-large, as he is able in a pursuit of "truth" and accuracy. In one telling passage Grant writes, "when a battle is raging one can see his enemy mowed down by the thousand, or the ten thousand, with great composure," (quoted in Wilson 153). Moments like these telescope the reader away from the actual bloodshed of battlefield and sterilizes the conflict of *actual conflict*. "The very objectivity of Grant's method of describing the war always works to eliminate its tragedy," writes Wilson; "his mind seems so firm and clear that no agony or horror can cloud it" (152). The buffer Grant creates between the blood and himself allows space for, even the Union "Butcher" moments to promote sentimentality and general fraternity amongst the Union and Confederacy. In both *Battles and Leaders* and *Personal Memoirs*, individual soldiers are conflated into a single mass and bloodshed is replaced with sentiment in order to fabricate a revisionist purpose of the war – shared struggle and national unity.

The authorial presence found in Bierce's works is almost antithetical to the objectivity, clarity, and abstraction found in the literatures of reunion. Instead of a firm, centered narrator that serves as an authority to guide the reader through the complexities of a battlefield, Bierce's narrators exist in a world of chaos and conflict, unable to properly comport themselves yet alone aide some poor reader dragged along for the horror show. Tom Quirck in an introduction to *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, Bierce's most significant contribution of war short stories, states that Bierce's style provides, "seemingly endless points of view," and creates, "evocations of a

mental world so vividly pictured that its mysterious reality is strangely compelling" (*Tales* xxii).

Opposed to Grant's broad telescopic view of the battlefield, Bierce puts the soldier under a

microscope, boring deep into the confounding lived experience of the soldier. "No writer,"

Blight writes, "sustained more lurid clarity about the hold of the war on his or her imagination"

(246). Bierce's process eliminates the space typically dedicated to sentimental reflections on the

nobility of war and replaces it with the thoughts of actual soldiers in battle – often following the

feverish minds of his protagonists in a style evocative of stream-of-consciousness narration. The

method is most famously used in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" wherein the entirety of

the plot is compressed into a moment in the mind before death.

At the same time, Bierce's exacting memory for detail and skills as a topographical

engineer give his stories a distinct sense of realism. The combination of keenly realistic

atmosphere and rudimentary experiments in stream-of-consciousness, create stories that

ultimately "are more surrealistic than realistic" (Blight 246). In his analysis of Bierce's work,

Michael Schaefer compares Bierce with another Civil War veteran and author John De Forest.

According to Schaefer, De Forest believed the purpose of his works were to, "convey objective

truth" of battle in an envelope of fiction (40), but for Bierce such a project is laughable. Instead,

Schaefer writes:

> Bierce aimed not at giving the reader a clear and essentially calming idea of what
>
> actually occurred but rather at conveying the surreal dimensions the battle's sights and
>
> sounds assumed in his mind… the essential truth about combat has little to do with
>
> surface details and, it is instead chiefly a matter of the individual's inevitably subjective
>
> responses to his experience. (Schaefer 42)

In content, as well as form, Bierce's writing is a distinct departure from collections like the *Century Series* or *Personal Memoirs*. The focus on individual soldiers and their vivid, personal, experiences of the war means that the physical and visceral bloodshed of the battle cannot be ignored. It is in this manner the mutual heroism of "shared sacrifice" loses its luster, and is dirtied by the realities of painful deaths and ruthless murders. The method is distinctly modern, and writers like Hemingway, Sassoon, and O'Brien among others are indebted to the sharp interjection Bierce made into the history of war writing. His style, so at odds with nearly every other contemporary account of the Civil War, serves as a refutation of the supposed objectivity of popular military writing and undermines their conclusions about the purpose of the war that undergirds the reconstruction of whiteness.

No short story demonstrates Bierce's macabre, surreal style better than "Chickamauga" first published in the *San Francisco Examiner*, in 1889. The story finds its source material in one of the most significant campaigns in the Western Theater, the Battle of Chickamauga. Part of the larger Chattanooga Campaign that would eventually open the door to the Deep South for Sherman's notorious march to the sea, Chickamauga itself was the second deadliest battle of the war with combined loses nearing 35,000, and was an especially costly loss for the Union. In General Daniel H. Hill's account of Chickamauga – or "The Great Battle of the West" as he names it – collected in *Battles and Leaders*, Hill employs some of reunion literature's most common tropes. The battle participants are deconstructed into statistical numbered masses and Hill contributes the majority of the account to the relative importance of each of tactical decision. Near the end of the tail, Hill waxes poetic about the "splendid fighting" when, "the flower of Southern youth was in the field" (Johnson 662). In a letter exchange with another general seeking details of the battle for his own memoir, Bierce directly commented upon Hill's account.

In an insincere compliment typical of his wit, Bierce called Hill's account a, "fine tribute of admiration to some of the men whom he fought," and puts Hill amongst the camp of Confederate, "good losers" (*A Much Misunderstood* 211). However, Bierce also wryly notes that "the historians who have found, and will indubitably continue to find, general acceptance are those who have most generously affirmed the good faith and valor of their enemies" (211). Indeed Hill's account was republished in one of the most popular collections of the era, whereas Bierce would struggle for some time to find a printing house willing to publish his collection of dark and disturbing accounts of the conflict, eventually turning to close friend for assistance. But Bierce was unflinching in his commitment to tell a different type of war story, and his "Chickamauga" stands in distinct counter to idea of valor and heroism that defined an era of war literature.

"When I ask myself what has become of Ambrose Bierce the youth, who fought at Chickamauga," Bierce writes, "I am bound to say that he is dead" (quoted in Cornes 49). A fitting reflection for a story that revolves around the perspective of a child who finds himself mired in war's destruction. "Chickamauga" follows the young child of a Southern planter who, in the spirit of playful adventure, goes exploring and subsequently gets lost in the woods behind his home. The early scenes first begin to draw our attention to familiar tropes of war memoir by employing the language common in the genre – "postures of aggression and defense," "stay his advance," "fell again upon the rear-guard" (*Tales* 20) – but, place them in the perverse context of a child's game, a method repeated throughout the story. Unwittingly, the child finds himself in the aftermath of a battle with a line of gruesomely injured soldiers approaching him. Bierce paints a chilling scene of the injured men who, "crept upon their hands and knees … strove to rise to their feet, but fell prone in the attempt" (22). Opposed to Hill's neat and orderly

descriptions, the soldiers, "did nothing naturally, and nothing alike," (22) the, "clumsy multitude dragged itself slowly and painfully along" (23). The story spares no detail in describing the wounded. One solider had a, "face that lacked a lower jaw – from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone" (192); from the head of another of the wounded "the brain protruded, overflowing the temple a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles" (194); and later men so exhausted that they collapse headfirst into a shallow creek and drown. Instead of being terrified by the scene the young boy finds disturbing pleasure in it, and follows the regiment towards a burning glow in the distance. In a ghastly twist ending, the conflagration the child found so exhilarating ends up being his own home caught in the middle of total war.

Interpretations of "Chickamauga" tend to focus on a generalized criticism of war's brutality, a level of cruelty inherent in human nature, and a somewhat nihilist understanding of purpose. Judy Cornes, for instance, writes:

> In the macabre world of Ambrose Bierce, childhood is a phantom, an ephemera, a cruel mockery that haunts the adult because it refuses to disillusion him. Bierce's mature man knows that he can never recapture his past, nor would he want to, because the past is a reflection of what we all become in the present: sick of our very existence but afraid to reveal our fears. (Cornes 48)

Though true on some level, these interpretations tend to overemphasize Bierce's existentialism and fail to historically contextualize his work. The childish ignorance of the story's protagonist in the context of reunion literature takes on a more rooted critique of the ideology of popular war writing. The "gallant" (Johnson 656) fighters at the Battle of Chickamauga are, not only lampooned in the story but demonstrated as devastatingly inhuman. The story begins by noting

the child as, "the son of a heroic race" whose spirit, "in the bodies of its ancestors, had for

thousands of years been trained to memorable feats of discovery and conquest," encouraged by

the boy's father who, "loved military books and pictures" (*Tales* 20). Bierce directly calls out

war writing and memoir as the source for the child's illusions which lead him to his disturbing

celebration of the destruction of his own home. Emboldened by the narratives of war perpetuated

by generals and commanders, the child situates himself the heroic leader of the wounded

soldiers– his playful command becoming a disturbing mirror to the actual horror marching

slowly behind him. Also notably the young protagonist is a both deaf and mute which Bierce

uses, on a practical level to add plausibility to the boy's initial ignorance of the battle around him

and to supplement the story's horror atmosphere with uncanny moments of silence. Figuratively,

the child's deafness reflects the ignorance of war memoirs to the human suffering they sanitize,

and muteness the inability for soldier-authors to communicate suffering. Ignorant or foolish

generals and officers would also often be a direct target of Bierce's wit.

In his famous collection of satire, *The Devil's Dicitonary*, Bierce would deride history as,

"an account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers

mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools" (110). Bierce's stories lampoon the knaves and fools

writing the history of the Civil War in an effort to further undermine the authority of their tales.

Generally Bierce detested the celebration of war heroes, stating, "What a miserable business this

is, this deification of the eminent" (*Phantoms 327*). The massive praise doled out at the time of

Grant's death Bierce found especially inundating. Disillusioned by politics and distrustful of any

leader with too much power, Bierce rallied against the war's typical heroes like Grant whose

veneration he found insufferable. In response to Grant's death, Bierce wrote:

> There are signs that the brainless claque of *laudatores hominin* who have been pruning
>
> their unwholesome carcasses to slaver the dead feet of grand old Grant, and doing their
>
> little best to affect all healthy souls with a wasting indisposition of his name and fame,
>
> have had their day. (*Phantoms* 326)

Similarly he accused Sherman and Howard of making, "criminal blunders" (*Phantoms* 219) at the Battle of Picket's Mill. In his journalistic career Bierce did, however, occasionally reveal favor for certain generals such as Buel, Thompson, and Hazen who he served under – Hazen a lifelong friend. As Bierce historian Brooks Simpson points out, that while he derided those writers who frantically debated which general to valorize and which to not, Bierce himself often, "willingly entered into the postwar battle of memory, determined to avenge the reputations of those generals of whom he prized and to denigrate the officers he disliked" (Simpson). Yet in the realm of fiction, in his short stories, Bierce's disdain and derision of the war's leaders is unequivocal.

A noted example of Bierce's satirical skill, "Jupiter Doke, Brigadier-General" uses the character of a witless general to mock the praise and political maneuverings of officers at the expense of military policy. Doke, a lifelong Republican without "a blot upon [his] political escutcheon" (*Complete* 356), is promoted to brigadier-general through recommendation. Doke proves to be a useless general, mainly using his promotion to advance his political career and secure arms deals for his family members. The hapless general, ends up unintentionally positioning his regiment directly in the line of the Confederates' main force. Prepared to crush Doke, the Confederates, in a stroke of ungodly luck, are obliterated by a tornado. Doke of course is lauded as fearless and apt general by the Union pundits unaware his assured defeat was only avoided by a natural disaster. Written as a series of letter exchanges and news articles, the style

of Doke's letters, "related with a pen of fire and [with] all the terrible interest of romance" (82) are juxtaposed to the short, unadorned letters of Doke's blunt, military minded counterpart, the aptly named Blount Wardorg. In the process Bierce mocks a few of the cultural activities common in post-reconstruction America: the memorialization industry which designates "a day of thanksgiving and public celebration" (353) to the bumbling Doke; the simultaneous stoicism and sentimentality of war memoirs; and the undeserved assent of wartime officials like Doke who is offered up as a potential presidential candidate.

In a more serious handling of the questionable authority of generals and commanders, "One Kind of Officer," depicts a disturbing case of friendly-fire. In the story a Captain Ransome is ordered by his superior to fire at any movement of troops in his front, and, upon requesting more information, is informed that, "it is not permitted to you to know *anything*. It is sufficient that you obey my order" (*Phantoms* 41). Due to an ominous and foreboding fog, Ransome unwittingly opens fire on a regiment of fellow Union soldiers, and in an added macabre twist, continues to fire even after discovering the truth in the name of following orders. The story contradicts sensible battle accounts and instead, like the fog that blocks the captain's vision, an atmosphere of confusion and anxiety permeates the story for both the general soldier and the stoic commander. Bierce writes, "the men felt insecure and talked among themselves of such tactical errors," while, "the field and line officers gathered and smoke more learnedly of what they apprehended with no greater clarity" (43). In one of the story's most lurid moments at its close, Ransome is being informed of his inevitable court-marshal. The scene encircles Ransome in fog and the looming figures of his disgusted men, pulling the reader in as well, then briefly flings the reader into his addled mind where he is experiencing the firing squad. Ransome, "felt the bullets tear his heart to shreds" and "heard the sound of the earth upon his coffin" (50). The

sliding consciousnesses here gives the tail a distinctly modernist feel. What the tail grapples with is war at its least heroic, friend on friend, humanity replaced by pride and thoughtless obedience–no sentiment or heroism to be found.

The racialized nature of post-reconstruction war narratives takes on a more explicit character when analyzed alongside their counterpart in the genre of reunion literature, the Old South and Lost Cause plantation romance. As the blood and destruction waged between the Union and Confederacy was scrubbed from veteran memoirs in the '80's and '90's, the South was experiencing a literary boom unprecedented in its history. A new distinctly Sothern movement in American fiction devoted itself to a revisionist history of the war inspired by a cult of masculine chivalry and romanticized codes of honor embodied by the slavocracy. Authors and playwrights like Thomas Nelson Page and Augustus Thomas, among others reinvigorated the idea of the master-slave relationship as fundamentally loving and paternal. Their stories depict a fanciful pre-war South whose harmony is torn asunder by the war. The genre's most popular tropes include masters and loyal slaves marching into war together, the death of the family patriarch, and the metaphoric reunion of the nation via marriages of Yankee soldiers and Southern belles. Again the class interests of the bourgeoisie permeate these works, Blight writes:

> The age of machines, rapid urbanization, and labor unrest produced a huge audience for a literature of escape into a pre-Civil War, exotic South that, all but "lost," was now the object of enormous nostalgia. Thousands of readers took sentimental, imaginative journeys Southward and into idealized war zones, guided and narrated by faithful slaves. (Blight 211)

Similar to reunionist memoirs, the main motor of plantation romances came from middle-class anxieties concerning class and race conflict. Northerners proved to have an especially capacious appetite for these fictions. Silber argues, "it might have been comforting to envision the seemingly, 'natural' sense of class that existed in the South," (109) which was being fictionalized in these works; a sense of class where, even after the fall of the plantation, black slaves inherently new their place. The Old South romance presents a, "system that rested less on physical or economic coercion and more on personal feeling" (Silber 109), which helped qualm the fears of a Northern bourgeoisie facing fierce attacks from a mobilizing proletariat. The marriage plot of these stories typically involved a Southern belle who is romanced by a virtuous Union soldier with the means to restore her plantation to former glory; the narrative conforming directly to a vision of a new prosperous South redeemed by free labor capitalism.

While pandering to Northern capitalists and petty-bourgeoisie, the romances also supported a white-supremacist vision by trumpeting the principles of the Lost Cause. A vehement crusade to justify Southern secession the Lost Cause, was accompanied by the veneration and deification of Confederate generals and the near worship of Confederate symbols like the battle flag. Lost Cause beliefs in the righteousness of the Confederacy and its eventual reascendancy formed the back bone of the original Klu Klux Klan and continue to inspire its predecessors today. The apolitical nature of Civil War memoirs gave authority to the Lost Cause by presenting the struggle of both combatants as equally noble. In turn the lost Cause, as presented in the plantation romance is able veil its white-supremacy in the cloak of heroism, honor, virtue and nobility. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain famously blamed the Civil War on, "Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments," of aristocratic and warlike Scotland whose, "silliness and emptiness, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and

worthless long-vanished society" (quoted in Wilson 444-5) fostered the South's prideful nobility and flamed the fans of secession. Twain is being facetious, but he is correct in identify the South's fixation with the heroism and chivalry of a dead age as being wedded to the project of the Confederacy – especially in regional literature post-reconstruction[1]. In his famous 1890 commencement address at Harvard, Du Bois, discussing Confederate President Jefferson Davis, points to the ideological bankruptcy of the lost cause and its romantic drapings:

> A soldier a lover, a statesman and a ruler; passionate ambitious and indomitable; bold reckless guardian of a people's All -- judged by the whole standard of Teutonic Civilization, there is something noble in the figure of Jefferson Davis; and judged by every canon of human justice, there is something fundamentally incomplete about that standard. (DuBois "Jeff Davis" 1-2)

Instead of championing radical emancipatory ideals, the reunion sentiment secedes ground from its onset and allows the political stakes of liberty and justice to be sullied by the travesties of white-supremacy.

Bierce's challenge to these tales is significantly less explicit, yet, his works do in more quiet ways undermine many tropes of the plantation hero. For example, "A Son of the Gods" tells a mostly comic tale of a Union officer, "on a snow white horse" and outfitted in full military regalia who Bierce describes as, "the most astonishing of all the phenomena of human vanity."

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[1] Wilson states, "The old South the Southerner idealized, which he may still be found idealizing today and which the Northerner has come to idealize, too, was mostly located in time in the eighteenth century; and in geography especially in eastern Virginia, colonial and post-Revolutionary, that powerful and wealthy society, self-confident and self-contained and ruled by few hundred families who were themselves pretty nearly autonomous" (Wilson 439). Which, not insignificantly is the same period T.W. Allen situates the original establishment of whiteness.

(*Phantoms* 248) The officer in a doomed display of bravery leads a one man charge at the enemy. Though the regular company at first mocks the officer, eventually they are one over by his daring display and make an unordered headlong charge at the enemy. The charge is unsuccessful, and the story ends with a bitter twist mourning, "those many, many needless dead" (252) duped by foolish heroism. Similarly, in "Chickamauga," the protagonist is explicitly marked as a member of the planter class which Bierce situates within the lost cause ideology, describing the planter class as, a "race… born to war and dominion as heritage" (*Tales* 20), and, as has already been demonstrated, the child's tragic flaw is a blind adherence to the military ideology of post-reconstruction.

In other, more covert ways, Bierce waged a quiet war on plantation fiction. For instance, the strong familial relations – heterosexual marriages, patriarchal lineage,- fundamental to plantation romances are often the source of ghastly humor in Bierce's writing. In another classic from *Tales*, "A Horseman in the Sky" a young Virginian enlists in the Union army against the wishes of his father, a Confederate general. In a twist of fate, the boy kills his father when the two meet in battle; the story compounds the irony (double twists are a trademark of Bierce) by revealing that the boy commits the patricide in order to follow his father's command that, "whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty" (*Tales* 6). Fratricide dominates "The Mockingbird," wherein a Union sharpshooter on watch, abruptly awaken from a dream about his estranged brother, shoots and kills his estranged brother. Even the homo- social/erotic bonds writers like Whitman found in the war, Bierce rejects in stories like "Coup de Grace" wherein friend murders friend. Just as Bierce eliminates space for sentiment in his work, he also eliminates space for human affection. The legal and social bonds necessary for the functioning of a marriage plot and the transfer of wealth that predicate the white reunion of North and South in

plantation fiction, Bierce eviscerates in the bloodshed of the conflict. However, contrasting Bierce's fiction to plantation romances, also conjures up another distinct difference between the two – the relative presence and absence of black characters in each.

Saturated with pointed, nuanced criticisms and perversions of contemporaneous popular literature, Bierce's war fiction is an active, self-aware challenge to the dominant memory of the Civil War they presented. This dominant memory, deflecting the anxieties of the middle-class and promoting the interests of capital, attempted to unify the nation through a vehicle of a homogenized experience of apolitical shared struggle which acted as the ideological mirror to the reestablishment of white-supremacy. However, while manufacturing an idea of unified 'whiteness' embodied by Civil War veterans, the literature of this period was also reestablishing, through plantation fiction, an idea of blackness based upon inferiority and a desire to be subjugated in order to counter the emancipatory vision of Radical Reconstruction. In this context Bierce's stories conform to other contemporaneous accounts of the war that also ignored black personhood and seemed unable to grapple with the question of slavery. In order to accurately assess his works in the context of post-reconstruction reunion literature, we are compelled to then locate blackness in them and relate that to blackness in plantation romance. Using the methodology of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, the following section will attempt to locate blackness in Bierce's work. Moreover, this approach is not an unanchored grafting of one analysis onto another entirely divergent historical and cultural period. Morrison's framework is based upon an analysis of gothic fiction and early 19th century Romanticism. These genres, as will be shown, have direct lineage with and act as inspiration for both Bierce's exploration of horror as well as the plantation romance. We turn then, to horror, the repressed, and blackness in Ambrose Bierce's gothic fiction.

The Most Monstrous and Grotesque Fictions:

Ambrose Bierce and Racial Horror

> I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of cavern terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. … He cried in a whisper at some image at some vison – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath –
> "The horror! The horror!"
> … Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent back head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt –
> "Mistah Kurtz – he dead."

> ― Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

In her landmark book of criticism *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison embarks on a project, she says, "is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90). The effort tries to change the conversation regarding race in American fiction from an investigation of the qualities of black characters *as characters*, instead to an investigation centering on what a text's manifestation of blackness – what Morrison calls an "Africanist presence" (5) – serves for the white-male protagonists of the text. Morrison's interjection into standard frameworks of analysis of race was, and is, significant for two main reasons. First, it was an important inversion of the hierarchy typically found in the academy of English literature – instead of a white-male critic looking at what white authors have to say about black "objects" or characters, it was a black-female critic looking at what the black objects of American literature have to say about their white-male authors. Secondly, the orientation towards the "Africanist presence" allowed Morrison to explore, in depth, the importance of what were before seen as peripheral black characters, incidental black bodies, and

tertiary black personhood, as well as diagram a coded language of darkness and light that often

acted as a substitution or proxy for racial anxiety. The second point is what is essential for our

current analysis because it provides a framework from which to excavate the significance of the

conspicuous absence of black characters and bodies in, not only Bierce's writing, but also

American literature post-reconstruction more generally. As demonstrated in the preceding

section, Bierce's war fiction is actively rejecting both the form and ideological content of the

literature of reunion that dominated in post-reconstruction America. What is unearthed is a set of

shared racial anxieties and ideological contradictions present at the end of the 19th century

among the white America's bourgeois, middle-class, and Bierce himself – but with two

competing conceptions of whiteness and white identity. This section will then turn to a

dialectical framework which incorporates Morrison's methodologies in order to determine how

American literature was attempting to resolve these apparent contradictions.

Playing in the Dark argues that the explorations of white identity and liberty in the

history of American literature[2] are dependent upon the black identities that they prescript to the

margins of their works. Morrison gives particular attention to early American romances from

authors like Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville whose works form the backbone of the American

canon. The black servants, freemen, and slaves who seem like incidental splashes of regional

color in these works are in fact central focal points around which the literary themes of the

period rotate. Moreover, the genre of the American romance or, particularly in the case of Poe,

the American gothic, also use a currency of metaphoric and symbolic language in which

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[2] Here we should say *white* American literature. The status of the slave narrative and other such products obviously fit into the analysis quite differently. Morrison's analysis should also be understood as a commentary upon the canon of American literature itself, which, in 1991 was still only in the early days of the relative expansion and flexibility seen today.

black/white and dark/light play a central role. The American Romantic Period, or as it is

sometimes termed the American Renaissance, lasts from the end of the 1820's until the onset of

the Civil War according to M.H. Abrams. The gothic romance that flourished in this era, Abrams

defines as a writing that:

> Develops a brooding *atmosphere,* of gloom and terror, represents events that are
>
> uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant
>
> psychological states. (Abrams 118)

 In Morrison's articulation these qualities derived from an acknowledgement of racial difference,

which "provided a huge payout of sign, symbol, and agency in the process of organizing,

separating, and consolidating identity along culturally valuable lines of interest" (39). Morrison

goes on to argue that the model, both in method and purpose, originated in the founding of the

nation's democratic institutions which, in their inability to resolve the question of slavery and

black liberty, were forced to strategically evade black personhood. Morrison writes:

> Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction
>
> to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the
>
> literature, who's founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the
>
> necessity for codes and restriction. (Morrison 6)

The racial coding imbedded in the constitution's silence on *race* but acceptance of slavery, is

mirrored in early American literature and serves similar ideological purposes. Essentially, the

process allows the writers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to reflect on the liberal-

individual's pursuit of freedom while evading, or at least displacing, the guilt of slavery. Of

course, different authors would respond to the anxiety of slavery in differing ways with differing conclusions, but there are striking similarities in their usage of blackness throughout.

The obfuscation and symbolic codification of blackness provided many antebellum gothics a methodology for creating their ominous atmospheres. The dim set pieces, brooding manners, and moonlit forests that characterize the era's romances receive their distinct foreboding sense of place via an ever-present blackness which creates tension in their narratives. "It is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is," writes Morrison, "we have words and labels for this haunting – 'gothic,' 'romantic,' 'sermonic,' 'Puritan'" (Morrison 36). When black persons are present they tend to be tokenized stock characters used as foils to romantic white-male protagonists. The authors are able to ventriloquize white-anxieties through a black character because of their lack of textual agency. A prime example of these forces in motion is Melville's *Moby Dick* wherein the novel's explicit exploration of race, democracy, and identity are understood *in* and *through* the erasure of the novel's black characters. For instance: Captain Ahab's monomaniacal quest for self is reflected in and through the fugitive slave Pip's descent into madness; at the novel's epilogue Ishmael, who must survive in order for the tale to be told, is saved from drowning by a coffin built by the, now dead, black Pacific Islander Queequeg; the striking foreground image of the Moby Dick, the great white-whale, is foregrounded by the harrowing pitch-black sea. The purpose here is not to condemn Melville's political views, which were anti-slavery, but to begin give shape to a set of discursive tactics that would later be employed by reunionist writers.

The works of Nathaniel Hawthorne are similarly obsessed with darkness, obscurity, and black/white binaries as he explored the mores of early American democracy. In 1850 Melville

noted of Hawthorne that a, "black conceit pervades him," a blackness that structures the atmosphere of his stories. Melville continues:

> You may be witched by his sunlight, - transported by the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you; - but there is a blackness of darkness beyond; and even his bright gildings but fringe, and play upon the edges of thunder-clouds. (Melville 1159)

In his analysis, Melville concluded that Hawthorne's obsession with a dark unknown came from religious sentiment. He writes:

> This great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin from whose visitation, in some shape or other, no deep thinking mind is always and wholly free. (Melville 1159)

Through Morrison's lens, however, the source of Hawthorne's fixation arises not only from Calvinism, but from racial anxiety created by the *nation's* original sin, slavery. The eponymic shroud in "The Minister's Black Veil" is one such example of the Hawthorne's fixation. In the story a minister for unknown purposes began to wear a dark veil over his face. The story, revolving around the choice to 'black' one's face, harkening to minstrely, explores the relationship between interior and exterior forms of shame. Blackness also plays a central role in Hawthorne's famous twice-told tale, "My Kinsmen, Major Malineux." Set in the moonlit (as always with Hawthorne) colonial Chesapeake Bay, the tale follows a young boy Robin who comes to the city and is an exploration of the revolutionary sentiment of New England colonists. While searching for his kinsmen, the boy meets an unsettling man who ends up leading a mob to tar and feather Robin's kinsmen. The story interrogates the line between mob and democracy as Robin becomes a proxy for the young nation. The duality of the "masses" is physically

represented in the mysterious man, who is described as having "fiery eyes… and a face of two colors" (Hawthorne 82). This moment as well as theme of black/white binary images throughout inexplicitly calls attention to a parallel duality between democracy and slavery. Robins unsettling decision to leave his kinsmen behind even as he is tarred can be seen as the human betrayal at the heart of racial segregation.

However, no author of the time depicts the anxiety of antebellum American and its literary displacement of race better then Edgar Allen Poe. In Poe, the great author of American gothic and horror, fear comes in the form of a blackness that haunts his white protagonists: creates obsessions in their minds; drives them mad by a demon they are unable to name, identify or exculpate; a demon shrouded in creeping shadows. Exemplified by Poe's inky black raven perched atop a the white bust of Athena – a referent to gender's intersection with race as well as the Greek model mythicized by American democracy – that drives the iconic poem's narrator over the edge. Morrison states that much of horror fiction during the antebellum was an, "opportunity to conquer fear imaginatively and to quiet deep insecurities," by opening a space within literature for, "the imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredibility, and terror - and terror's most significant, overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened" (37). It is difficult to assess if the descent into madness of Poe's characters offer any sort catharsis, or displacement of anxiety, for readers, and it is quite possibly the works served to do the opposite. What can be certain is that in Poe, terror is inextricable from the racial symbolic codification laid out by Morrison. Such is the case with the Poe horror story, "The Black Cat" wherein, the narrator, after killing his wife's cat is haunted by its "phantasm" (Poe 601) which drives him mad and leads him to murder his own wife and hide her in the walls of the home. Again, a figure of blackness is used to articulate a hidden anxieties. Poe also layers on

other racial imagery such as the Cat's hanging (reminiscent of lynching[3]) as well as the

narrator's comment concerning, "self-sacrificing love of a brute" (597) which parrots the

paternal justifications of slavery.

While demonstrating the similar employment of the symbolic language of

blackness/whiteness, *Playing* does make useful distinctions between the methods of Poe and

Melville. Melville used allegorical formations, such as the white-whale and Ahab's racially

mixed crew, "to investigate and analyze hierarchic difference" (69). Poe, on the other hand,

"deploys allegorical mechanism[s]" in his work, "not to confront and explore" racial ideologies,

but instead to "evade and simultaneously register" (69). Morrison believes Poe is self-conscious

in this process and aware of the coded work he is doing – a dual avoidance of race, and

employment of it via symbolic capital which the text registers through the anxieties of white

characters. Poe's evade-and-register method is the same method found throughout Bierce's

work. Unsurprisingly many critics have drawn direct comparisons to the pair, and often

identified Bierce's horror fiction as a sharing a lineage with Poe.

Today's scholars along with many of the literati in the gilded age have compared Bierce's

work to that of Poe, and have drawn extensive connections between their style, thematic content,

and, in some cases even plot. A 1909 article from *Current Literature* observed that both authors,

"dwelt with the occult and the terrible" and were, "fascinated by science;" the critique going as

far to say, "[Bierce] has tried his hand at everything Poe has tried" (quoted in Miller 130). Often

quick to offend, Bierce himself rejected the notion that he borrowed plot devices from Poe or

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[3] A reminder that the sad sordid history of lynching in America actually begins before the Civil War, though it reaches its frightening zenith after.

found any particular inspiration in the author's works. In a letter to Walter Neale, a publisher and close friend, Bierce wrote in regards to one of his critics:

> Poe wrote tragic tales of the supernatural; so do I. This immortal ass evidently does not know that anybody else did, and thinks nobody else should have dared. Well, if I had left out the tragedy and the supernatural I would still have been an imitator, not only of Poe, but of others, for my stories would still have been tales. (quoted in Miller 135)

In his robust account of the connections between the two authors, Arthur M. Miller identifies a method of inventive imitation in Bierce as well as, what he labels, "a romantic 'echo'" (143) calling back to Poe. "Maxon's Master," "Beyond the Wall," and "The Widower Turmore" Miller identifies as being directly indebted to Poe's plots while demonstrating multiple similarities in the authors use of perspective and setting. It is also clear, that many of Bierce's opinions on what constituted good literature and quality fiction found their origins in Poe. Bierce's aggressive championing of the shorty story as a superior form than the novel is shared in Poe's general philosophy of literature. Though he may have denied accusations of borrowing from Poe, "for Bierce there was only one 'right' kind of fiction form," Miller states, "and Poe had invented it" (150). Poe's influence on Bierce is significant in the current analysis, because it directs us towards shared structuring principles that reflect Bierce's orientation towards blackness in his works.

"The Damned Thing" for instance is an example of Bierce's horror fiction that draws clear parallels between Bierce and Poe, displaying similar articulations of anxieties in both writers work. "The Damned Thing" concerns the inexplicable death of a country gentlemen, in what one can assume is rural California. Though the setting is different, the tale does share Poe's tendency to locate his stories in remote, secluded, alienated locals. In typical Poe fashion, the

story attempts to explain away its own mystery through the use of speculative science; however, the affect is actually to both give the story added plausibility, while also ensuring the science isn't capable of fully explaining away the central fantasy. As in Poe's work, again blackness plays a central role in exploring the protagonists' anxieties. The story opens in the room of a murdered man, lit by "light of the towl candle" whose shadows, "would throw into obscurity half the room" (*Complete* 97). Similarly, The Damned Thing itself lurking so deeply in the shadows that even in the daylight, it is invisible – an unnamable presence seeking vengeance for an unacknowledgeable crime. At the same time, the tale cannot seek justice for the dead man because that which struck him down cannot be acknowledged either – a classic gothic repression. While Bierce found his inspiration in Poe's gothic horror, post-reconstruction's plantation romance also resonates with the early American romance.

Certain odd connections standout when one observes the literatures of the early American period broadly. For instance, when one observes the romantics, whom would form America's first canonical literature, alongside the contemporaneous slave narrative and plantation romance an array of mirrorings, inversions, and adaptations appear. Of course, no single model can be developed that fully explains the unintended associations these works made among one another as they clashed throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries; however, critic and theoretician Henry Louis Gates, Jr. does offer a useful framework for helping to understand both the symbols and the ideologies at play in the period. In his work *Figures in Black,* Gates lays out a dialectical relationship among the slave narrative, plantation romance[4], and American romantics. Gates writes:

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[4] In the previous analysis, the origins of the plantation romance appear to be much later then Gates's theory permits. This is accurate, in so far as our conversation was considering the historical appearance of the romance as a part of the literature of reunion. Notably, similar romances had appeared earlier in the antebellum period in

> We may think of it as the three terms of the dialectic - thesis, antithesis, synthesis -
>
> wherein the themes of black / and white, common to the biopolar moment in which the
>
> slave narratives and the plantation novel oscillate, inform the very structuring principles
>
> of the great gothic works of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. (Gates 50-51)

In this figuration, the American romantics draw upon two diametrically opposed sources and combine their elements. Hawthorne's moon beams are actually prefigured in the plantation novel's, "moonbeams and magnolias" (Gates 50), which, in turn, find their opposite in the form of the guiding north star in the slave narrative. Whereas the dimensions of interiority found in the free slaves journey, inform the quest for self in the American romantic, opposed by the ideological surety of the Southern dramas. *Playing in the Dark* can be seen as an articulation of the ideological consequences this dialectic has upon the founding canon of American literature. The "oscillation" created in the synthesis, is the same phenomena of simultaneous omission and centering of blackness that Morrison describes. The 'synthesis' between the voice of the oppressive white master and the voice of the unfree black slave is that of the questing liberal individual – the omission, codification, or ventriloquism of black bodies is the practical consequence of the thesis traveling through the antithesis. This has consequences for the inheritors of these literary genres as they manifest at the end of the 19th century. It we trace David Blight's three visions of Civil War memory back into their progenitors in Gates's dialectic we get the following: the emancipatory vision is the legacy of the slave narrative; the white-supremacist vision is ideologically aligned with the Old South of the plantation romance; and the reunionist vison is the inheritor of the synthesis found in the American romantics. The

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response to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and slave narratives. Though similar in style and content, the important distinction between these works and there later aberration is that they *do not* serve the interests of sectional reconciliation.

similarities in symbol and form that middle-class and bourgeois literatures of reunion share with American romanticism is likewise based upon the oscillation between the dual demands of white-supremacy of the Southern elite and the heritage of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Tomas Nelson Page's *Red Rock*, represents in the fullest 'synthesis' of the literary dialectic of the post-reconstruction era. Christopher Bundrick, exploring the heritage of American romanticism in *Red Rock,* argues that the story, enveloped in the genre of gothic fiction, employs a dual narrative in order to promote an industrial reunion while maintaining the idyllic fiction of the Old South. A hallmark of Confederate melodrama, *Red Rock* occupies, "a ruined postwar southern landscape haunted by once-great houses and the evidence of past violence … a novel well situated in the Victorian gothic tradition" (69). It also focuses on an unearthing of psychological trauma, a classic gothic theme, in the form of Civil War memory. Simultaneously, however, it is nestled in a pastoral fondness for an idealized Old South. In *Red Rock,* Page recognizes, unlike some of his political contemporaries in the South, that the Union victory has meant the decisive end of slavery. *Red Rock* ultimately accepts that "modern industrialism was quickly becoming the dominant social and economic order in the United States" (71). However, the white-supremacists of the planter class are still driven to maintain the structure of the Old South. The two contradictory forces, embodied in the opposed characters of Jacquelin Gray and Steve Allen, should rend each other apart in the novel. However, they instead displace their conflict onto the black villain of Moses. The opposing forces are able to resolve their apparent contradictions by uniting to murder and lynch the "wild beast" (Page 358) Moses who accosts the story's pure Southern belle. The destruction of Moses's black body in the story, the sublimation of the dialectic's thesis, allows the synthesis of reunonism to occur. In Civil War memoirs, a similar phenomenon is occurring wherein emancipation and blackness are erased

from memory in order to resolve the contradiction between the continued presences of white-supremacy in the South and the victory of the Union, and adding a further displacement of the sacrifice demanded by the cause of emancipation.

Where then does Bierce fit in the dialectic of clashing ideologies of race whose synthesis is reflected in post-reconstruction literature? On one side sits the thesis: the Civil War, through bloody contest, has been won by the Union opening a path for emancipated blacks to take up a struggle for full equality. Across from this rests the opposite, the antithesis: Southern elites, though defeated militarily in the war and economically through the abolition of slavery, refuse to concede neither their class position nor the system of white-supremacy that undergirds it. Lastly, there is the ideological resolution of the two, the synthesis: a reunion of the nation via the expansion of Northern 'free labor' into the "New South" with the concession of a continued system of black subjugation all of which is facilitated by an amnesia regarding the bloodshed of the war. On the one hand Bierce rebels against an essential ideological component of the dialectic – an amnesia towards the war's conflict – which seems to place him in trajectory of emancipation. However, Bierce also demonstrates a willingness to participate in reunion's obfuscation of black personhood and desire for liberty.

Participation with the displacement of Black bodies in Bierce, does not inherently produce the same literary affect as it does in plantation romance. Having developed the method in relationship to the American gothic, but not the plantation romance, Bierce employs it, like Poe, to draw out anxieties whereas, the reunion romance uses it to displace anxieties. This occurs, not only in Bierce's horror fiction, but also his Civil War writings. "The Affair at Coulter's Notch" best represents the way in which Bierce's war stories engage in a racial politics by employing the symbolic register of blackness while displacing actual black identities. In the

story a skilled canoneer, Coulter, is forced, due to a generals petty squabbles, to hold an almost untenable position against the enemy. Through skill luck and force of will Coulter survives, but as we found out later in the cross-fire a plantation home had been destroyed. In typical Biercian fashion, it is Coulter's home. In the story, the Africanist presence primarily emerges in what Wade Newhouse describes as a, "transforming" of the characters, "racial identification" (Newhouse). The soldiers at the guns become covered in soot in a twisted enactment of blackface, and, "enact a ritualized parody of slave labor, ordered by white men to work themselves to death to destroy, rather than support the plantation" (Newhouse). Similarly, the reader discovers that it is Coulter's home when he is mistaken for a dead black man while clutching the dead bodies of his wife and child. Coulter, "thus exposes his true identity as a southern husband and father, but he does so through his acquisition of that social figure's ideological opposite" (Newhouse). The story then literally has its white protagonist *embody* blackness. The embodiment allows Coulter to return to his identity, however, it does so only after rending the value of that identity mute.

Blackness in the Southern plantation romance is one of two varieties: either a docile body used to ventriloquize white desire, or a menacing threat to be physically displaced in the text through violence. Both instances serve to *relieve* white racial anxieties. Blackness in Bierce, on the contrary, draws out white anxiety. Again this difference does not yet clarify Bierce's position in the dialectic. Though done to different purposes, Bierce is still using the presence of blackness to explore an agenda of whiteness; the emancipatory project, as Blight says, is one rooted in the *actual vision* of free blacks and their abolitionist allies. Bierce's vision, is one of white horror.

This section begins by quoting the famous last words of the enigmatic madman Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness;* the lines resonate for a number of reasons. Foremost is

Conrad's use of nearly the entire continent of Africa as a dark, faceless object to reflect upon the humanity of his white protagonists – an exemplar of Morrison's argument. *Darkness* also "refines upon" a tradition of American writers such as Melville and Poe whose, "masterwork" takes, "the form of a catastrophic quest" (Levin 202) and shows the way some of the lineages discussed above extend into the 20th century. Most importantly, however, these lines demonstrate a world view shared by much of Bierce's writing. Kurt's final assessment of the world, its shocking raw horror, is a sympathy Bierce shared. Though Death appears to be his closest companion, horror seems to be his fundamental disposition.

Exploring this disposition can help us better understand why Bierce's writing, while sharing so many characteristics of the literature of reunion, cannot situate itself into the dialectical relationship above. To do so, we turn to his career as a journalist in the American West. In San Francisco, Bierce encountered a city ravaged by the criminality of railroad companies, and capitalist class that had long been reliant upon a racially bifurcated system of free labor through the Chinese "coolie." Simultaneously, the city was in the throes of massive labor unrest that itself was divided upon political and racial lines. Investigating Bierce's biography and his work as a journalist provides us insight into material conditions that inform his writing and relationship to dominate constructions of whiteness in the post-bellum, while also adding depth to our understanding of these same constructions by investigating a distinctly different racial construction occurring in the West.

The West and Whiteness:
Chinese Migrants, "Free labor," and Ambrose Bierce

    Unreal City
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
…

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him crying: 'Stetson!
'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

— T.S. Elliot, *The Waste Land*

    Today Ambrose Bierce is typically remembered for a few of his most ambitious war stories, most often "An Occurance at Owl Creek Bridge," and occasionally for the witticisms collected in his satirical *The Devil's Dictionary*. However, in his own time Bierce was much more highly regarded as journalist, and indeed, his career in newspapers as a reporter, columnist, and editor is what sustained his other literary endeavors. However, academics, as well as readers, have largely overlooked the 40 year span, from 1867 until 1909, that Bierce spent in journalism. As Bierce scholar Lawrence Berkove points out, in the last twenty years of Bierce's career, "he was perhaps the only independent and certainly one of the most talented and influential of the journalists on the Hearst staff," (Berkove 283). Bierce was first introduced to the industry, at a young age, working as printers devil for the *Northern Indianian*, a newspaper with Republican and abolitionist sentiments. After his service and time abroad, Bierce would settle in San Francisco and throughout his life earn staff positions for a number of the town's best publications including the *Argonaut* where he would began his column "Prattle", *The San Francisco Wasp*, and finally securing a position at the *San Francisco Examiner* where the media

giant William Randolph Hearst gave him the flexibility to write as he wished with little editorial intrusion.

Like so many American cities, San Francisco at the dawn of the 20th century was in a crucible of change. The expansions of the rail, port, and banking system in the region helped establish San Francisco as a trade hub and by the 1890's the city was among America's ten largest. Yet, the growth was also accompanied by a massive accumulation of wealth in the hands of the cities bankers, railroad tycoons, and their corrupt political operatives – the disparity of which was embodied in the lavish homes of the infamous Nob Hill. The city's working class was in the midst of a heated struggle, but was also experiencing an existential crisis as it confronted waves of migrant Chinese "coolie" labor the railroad imported to undercut their wages. In 1875 when Bierce first began his notorious column "Prattle," the depression was hammering San Francisco, and class and race antipathies were at boiling points as Denis Kearney's Workingman's party began a dual war on the bosses and their supposed "coolie" collaborators. Situating the final section of the project in gilded San Francisco through the lens of Bierce's journalism serves two important purposes: 1) it gives us an opportunity to better clarify the racial politics of labor in the post-reconstruction era by comparing the plight of the Chinese "coolie" in the West with the tactics used to oppress blacks in the South; 2) it troubles any easy dichotomy between the North and the South which elucidates the transcontinental project of reunion being propagated by the industrial capitalists in all three regions of the country; 3) it provides some answer to our lingering questions regarding Bierce's relation to the dialectic of 19th century literature by exposing the politics that the inform his writing.

Undoubtedly, Bierce's most important work as a journalist came in the form of his relentless campaign against the political corruption in California, and crown laureate of that

achievement, his print war against the Southern and Central Pacific Railroad Companies.

Bierce's crusade against the "Rail-Rogues" as he liked to call them began while he was still

employed by the *Wasp,* but it wasn't until he joined Hearst's team of muckrackers that his efforts

could really take off. In his most publicized dual with the Rogues, in 1896 traveled to D.C. to

cover public hearings concerning the fate of Collis P. Huntington Southern Pacific Railroad.

Essentially, Huntington had employed a massive team of lawyers, lobbyists, and lowdown no-

good politicians in an attempt to push a funding bill that would effectively forgive the company's

$75 million dollar debt. The crass and unapologetic corruption had Bierce livid and he spared no

unflattering remark or smearing revelation against Huntington. Edmund Wilson writes that,

> He for once found in Collis P. Huntington, the California millionaire, an adversary who
>
> merited his venom. Bierce was able in this connection to perform a real public service by
>
> exposing the ingenious devices by which the Southern Pacific Railroad had avoided
>
> paying its debts to the government. (Wilson 630)

In the end the bill did not pass muster in congress, and, with thanks in part to Bierce's efforts, the

company was forced to pay back the entirety of its borrowings.

Before defeating the most prominent of the "Big Four" railroad tycoons, Bierce had been

sharpening his pen in San Francisco fighting the other three, Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker,

and Leland (or $teeling as Bierce preferred) Stanford. Before joining Hearst, Bierce's "Prattle"

found a comfortable home in the pages of *Wasp* which, "had long been a Democratic organ and,

as such, reflexively anti-railroad" (174). Bitter Bierce was unflinching in his pursuit of personal

justice. In '84 he wrote:

Swindling corporations are not objects of our animosity; they are facts. The real facts of

the Central Pacific Railroad Company, for example, are Stanford, Crocker and

Huntington. If the corporation is a thief, it is because Stanford, Crocker and Huntington

have stolen. Three knaves cannot by combining their rascality make themselves honest

men. (*Satanic* 201)

Bierce, however also noted the corruption in his own industry, and would often lash out at fellow

journalists whom he saw swiping from the public coffers or putting themselves in the pockets of

big money. It is perhaps not surprising then, that when he set out to provide a definition of "ink"

in his Devil's dictionary he described it as, "a villainous compound … chiefly used to facilitate

the infection of idiocy and promote the intellectual crime" (*Dictionary* 130). He then added more

pointedly:

There are men called journalists who have established ink baths which some persons pay

money to get into and others out of. Not infrequently it occurs that a person who has paid

to get in pays twice as much to get out. (*Dictionary* 130)

Certainly Bierce positioned himself as a moral rock in a tide of corruption and impropriety.

However, if Bierce's crusade against the corporate elites of the railroad paints him as a champion

of the workingman, the reality is less simple. Wilson, for instance, writes that Bierce often

contradicted his own views on the masses. Bierce could, "alternately contend, for example, that

the unemployed are all incompetents who deserve to be left to their fate," while also stating,

"that the government ought to do something for them" (Wilson 627). Even more complicated

and contradictory is Bierce's relationship to Chinese migrants and California's system racial

labor exploitation based upon the category of the "coolie."

While the interests of the American bourgeoisie were coalescing around the project of reunion and a new racial cast system, the workers movement was demonstrating signs that abolitionist vision still had a footing among whites. The most impressive of these was the stunning strike wave in the late '70's that kicked off the struggle the long fight for the 8-hour work day. Especially in cities like St. Louis, there appeared a real potential for racial unity among the proletariat. David R. Roediger writes that, "there was a stunning 'moral impetuous', as Marx put it, injected into the working class movement by the Civil War and emancipation," noting that, "antislavery luminaries were not just welcomed onto labor platforms but courted by workers' organizations" (168). However, the cross-racial potential of the movement was not even across the nation, and in the West the growth of anti-Chinese organizations was taking hold of the working masses. "In San Francisco, another center of the 1877 uprising," writes Roediger, "socialists initiated a movement for the eight-hour work day and nationalization of railroads but anti-Chinese clubs seized the initiative" (168). San Francisco's Denis Kearney would grab hold of the rising class conflict and anti-railroad sentiment and bend it towards his racist agenda, forming the xenophobic Workingmen's Party of California[5] during this period which was one of the first explicitly anti-Chinese organized labor force. The history of the racialized exploitation of Chinese labor is complex one that runs along a parallel, but distinct tract from the plight of black Americans.

The "Negro Problem" and the "Chinese Question" were both overlapping debates that used the figure of a racialized other in order to define the exclude them from labor, pit them against fellow white workers, and solidify a legal system that excluded people of color form full participation in society. The work of Lisa Lowe, Edlie L. Wong, and Moon Ho-Jung, among

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[5] Not to be confused with the Workingmen's Party of the U.S.

others demonstrates that the practices in the South that allowed the "free labor" system to emerge alongside a white-supremacy are historically rooted in tactics used racialize Chinese migrants and exclude them from equal participation in the American working class. Before this, however, in the era of slavery, Chinese migrants would be categorized in to the racial category "coolie" or "coolie-slave" and debates around the status of Chinese labor would be counterpoised with debates around black slave labor in the South and white 'free labor' in the North. Lowe writes:

> The great instability and multivalence of the term *coolie* suggests that it was a shifting, historically contingent designation for an intermediary form of Asian labor, used both to define and to obscure the boundary between enslavement and freedom, and to normalize both. (Lowe, 25)

After reconstruction, the plight of the Chinese migrant and the emancipated slave is further intertwined the principles of equality and freedom supposedly Republicans embodied in the emancipated slave were being martialed to argue for the exclusion of the Chinese "coolie-slave" in the Pacific West Coast.

Chinese migrants first became an attractive and economically viable source of labor following the end of the transatlantic slave trade. Planters in the British West Indies, faced with the end of slavery, were the first to turn to importing Chinese contract labor and began adopting legal practices of exclusion, via restrictions of the rights of citizenship and social participation, in order to ensure they had a social control mechanisms in place against this new working population. The California Gold Rush and the development of the transcontinental railroad catalyzed a similar demand in America, and the first system Chinese coolie labor began to be imported in the 1850's. By the 1870's as labor competition on the Pacific Coast heightened, a system of racist cultural representation and of legal exclusion - often enacted through San

Francisco courts – had emerged and eventually coalesced into the America's first law restricting an ethnic group from immigration, The Chinese Exclusion Act. Republicans in the West were martialing an image of a self-exploited, "coolie slave" to gain political capital and cool class tensions. Wong states:

> Anti-Chinese agitators called on the "coolie-slave" to mobilize the patriotic memory and moral indignation of abolitionism for the purpose of protecting and empowering white labor, especially as the Republican Party reformed itself during Reconstruction and as conflicts between labor and capital heightened. (Wong 7)

The image of the "coolie-slave" reveals how easily the principles of the former party of abolition could be abused for the promotion of white-supremacy. These threats, coupled with racist images that depicted Chinese migrants as a faceless menacing horde, that populated the periodicals of California, helped sow racial division amongst the working class. Just as plantation literature ventriloquized the voice of free blacks to win the minds of an anxious Northern middle class to white supremacy, the imagery of California's racist media campaigns was attempting to divert the energies of the white working class. While the emancipatory vision lived on in the struggles of black and white workers in places like St. Louis, in San Francisco Kearney's Workingmen's Party came to represent the tragic consequences of the failure of that vison.

Just as Bierce's relationship with the labor movement was vexed, his relationship with Chinese migrants in California is equally contradictory. On the one hand, there is documented evidence of Bierce condemning abuses against Chinese migrants in his columns. According to his biographer, Roy Morris Jr., "for a supposed elitist, Bierce demonstrated a consistent and career-long concern for such abused minorities as the Chinese and the Mormons" (119). Bierce was especially vocal when attacks came from white Christians whom held especially strong anti-

Chinese views rooted in ideas of "heathenism". For instance when a Chinese women was found

murdered in San Francisco, Bierce, in his typical cynical tone, wrote:

> The cause of her death could not be accurately ascertained, but as her head was caved in
>
> it is thought by some physicians that she died of galloping Christianity of the malignant
>
> Californian type. (Morris 120)

Morris's assertions seem in line with Bierce's short story "The Haunted Valley" which largely

works to undermine anti-Chinese stereotypes. Though, as Christine Cynn argues, it does so at the

expense of the white working class, through the character, Dunfer who insists, "that Western

white working-class solidarity accounts for his anti-Chinese antagonism" (241). Still, these must

all be taken alongside the fact that Bierce was a long time editor of the *San Francisco Illustrated*

Wasp. Though anti-railroad, the *Wasp* was also very much anti-Chinese and the home to some of

the most horrendous depictions of the "coolie" stereotype. Bierce worked alongside and

employed cartoonists like Frederick Keller, best known for his "coolie" political cartoons. The

contradictions likely reflect Bierce's oscillation between political outrage and apathy, and as he

got older apathy and despair more and more came to define his politics.

The fiery abolitionist sentiment that inspired young Bierce to join the war, seemed to

have all but died out in his later life. Though in his 1898 reflection on freedmen who had joined

the Union cause, "Black Soldiering," Bierce abandons his usual wry tone and writes, "the Negro

will fight and fight well," stating that upon seeing a black regiment in battle, "it was as pretty an

example of courage and discipline as one could wish to see" (*Phantoms* 285). However,

elsewhere, Bierce reflects reservations on the Union cause and black freedom. In his satirical

definition of the "negro" Bierce more flippantly acknowledges the continued inequality of blacks

in America. He writes:

The *piece de resitance* in the American political problem. Representing him by the letter

n, the Republicans begin to build their equation thus: "let *n* = the white man." This,

however, appears to give an unsatisfactory solution.

When in the early '90's questions regarding whether the nation should return to the former

Confederate states their captured flags, Bierce, unlike many other Union veterans, sided with the

Confederacy. In a piece from his days at the *Examiner,* "A'Soldiering for Freedom," Bierce

seems to have entirely lost any sense of pride in fighting for the cause of emancipation. He

writes:

At one time in my green and salad days I was sufficiently zealous for universal and

unqualified Freedom to engage in a four years' battle for its promotion. There were other

issued involved, but they did not count for much with me. I am now glad that they were

involved, for their presence as threads to the Fate-woven fabric of events spares me the

disquieting consciousness of misguided zeal. (*Phantoms* 316)

The views reflect the conservative side of Bierce. Though often a champion for just causes,

Bierce's independent political views were generally based upon his distaste for authority, rather

than more noble interests.

Indeed Bierce had a well-developed mistrust towards government, politics, and

democracy in general throughout his life. In Berkove's discussion of him regarding the

California utopian movement, he argues that Bierce's objection with republican government lies

in its hypocritical nature, "because republican government did not openly describe itself as

utopian but nevertheless incorporated utopian assumptions and goals." (Berkove). The masses in

motion also concerned Bierce, who was in many ways an elitist who believed most folks were

too stupid or easily corrupted to participate in their own self-government. In his markedly bizarre story "Ashes of the Beacon" Bierce writes from the perspective of an imagined America after the fall of the Republic. "Of the many causes that conspired to bring about the lamentable failure of 'self-government' in ancient America," Bierce says, "the most general and comprehensive was, of course, the impracticable nature of the system itself" (quoted in Berkove 290). Morris too admits that the major reason Bierce opposed racists like Denis Kearney was because Bierce, "did not believe in either a political or a revolutionary solution was possible" (163). Continuing Morris explains, that, "unlimited suffrage," according to Bierce, "had created a system in which 'the tyranny of public opinion' had brought about a government that was both unstable and unprincipled" (163). While often feverishly devoted to his beliefs, Bierce rejected any collective political solutions, and instead relied upon his own individualistic campaigns of journalistic fury.

While Bierce's disdain for the dominate relations of society kept him from participating accepting the reunionist project of the late 19th century, it was also these politics that prevented him from participating in an alternative emancipatory vision. Such a vision relied on a belief in the power of democratic institutions and the right for, not just freed slaves, but all people to participate in them. If the Civil War was indeed "America's Unfinished Revolution" as Foner describes it, then Bierce wanted nothing to do with the work needed to finish it. "It is in vain that all this struggle should have been experienced," a Boston labor newspaper wrote loftily after the war, "if human rights and human brotherhood are not henceforth better recognized than ever before" (Silber 15). Sadly for Bierce, especially in his later years as he mused on the incompatibility of democracy with humanity, it did appear that the Civil War had been fought in vain. This political disposition is the source of the "horror" that permeates his fiction, and Bierce

uses the figurative language of blackness and the displacement of black bodies to express that horror.

The final section of *Playing in the Dark* Morrison discusses the work of Hemingway – yet another author indebted to Bierce's innovations – closes her critique with a caveat that, "these deliberations are not about the particular author's attitudes towards race. That is another matter," nor are they meant to engage in, "an investigation of what might be called racist or nonracist literature" (90). Nor, does this project draw upon Bierce's political life to pass judgement; it draws upon his political and personal life to help clarify the vexing contradictions Bierce had in his relationship with the literary context in which he is situated – his work often seems a world apart from his contemporaries because, in reality, he often is. *The Wasteland* introduces this section in part because Elliot is the emblem of the conservative strain of elitist High-Modernism that Bierce would likely have found affinity with (that is if he wasn't too busy picking fights with them). Though there are distinct differences, Bierce, a reactionary at heart, would likely have enjoyed much of Elliot's political conservatism. The *literature* of both writers also bare strikingly similar orientations towards the world around them. Both are produced in the wake of a war that wrought never before seen destruction, and both respond with brooding dark reflections on the world these conflicts created. Similarly, both works are so absorbed in the experience of alienation, that it leads them to a depiction the masses under capitalism as a grotesque, unreal figure. The importance of drawing upon the similar personal lives of the pair is to suggest that the reason Bierce, while engaging in the struggle over Civil War memory, does not fit neatly into any of the post-bellum currents of literature, is because his work is actually beginning to articulate a new literary orientation towards war that would be further articulated by the modernist. Abrams writes of modernism that, "the reality of the war had shaken faith in the

moral basis, coherence, and durability of Western civilization" (175) – all ideas Bierce is beginning to engage with.

How then does Bierce's early modernist orientation to memory relate to ideas of whiteness in the post-reconstruction period? First, the process of arriving upon Bierce's early modernism has clarified and expanded our understanding of the ideological reconstruction of whiteness occurring in reunion literature. This literature, a middle-class bourgeoisie response to class and race antagonism, was predicated upon the displacement of free black bodies in war literature, the ventriloquizing of the voices of free blacks in plantation romances, and the mischaracterization of Chinese migrants in political satire. Each of these combined in an effort to manufacture a unified white identity unburdened by the lingering threat of abolitionism and the exploitation at the heart of "free labor." Secondly, thinking of Bierce as an early modernist, gives his literature both a forward- and backward-looking perspective. Bierce acts as a mediator between the ideologies of the Reconstruction era and that of rising modernism. As such, Bierce demonstrates that the success of reunion literature is a relative phenomenon. While the material conditions at the turn of the century – class conflict, rising industrialism, the reestablishing of economic racial hierarchies encoded in law – gave rise to reunion literature, they also gave rise to Bierce's modernist subjectivity. Though the brooding obsession with death, horror, and a general rejection of the world that Bierce based his conception of white-identity upon doesn't offer a particularly hopeful vision, it still demonstrates the weaknesses in the ideological construction of white identity. Bierce's draws out, in a shared genre and with the same tactics, unresolved tensions at the heart of reunion literature's false portrait of unified whiteness.

Epilogue:

Alternative Vision

For all of its literary mystery and historical intrigue, Ambrose Bierce's disappearance into the Mexican wilderness in 1914 is also at its heart a very tragic tale. As the end of his life neared a close Bierce's letters more and more reflected his obsession with death. Though there is only speculation, it seems quite possible that Bierce, decided to slip away to beyond the border in order to quietly take his own life. The story is a sad one, but in many ways sadness is inseparable from Bierce's tale. It's from the edge of despair that Bierce's protagonists most grip us. It is from a sense of despair that Bierce produces his most biting satire. And it is despair that forms his haunting vision of America at the turn of the century. Yet, after delving for so long so deeply into Bierce's macabre world it is important to remind ourselves that there are other visions of the world as well. W.E.B. DuBois, a lifelong activist, radical thinker, writer, historian and socialist is one the finest examples of the emancipatory vision at the turn of the century. In DuBois the vision of an America free from the tyranny of exploitation and a black populace at last liberated from the chains of white supremacy was fully imaginable and accomplishable. Though, DuBois, like Bierce, understood despair. He never succumb to it. I end with his vision, and his words:

> And yet, despite this, and despite the long step backward towards slavery that black folk have been pushed, they have made withal a brave and fine fight; a fight against ridicule and monstrous caricature, against every refinement of cruelty and gross insult, against starvation, disease and murder in every form. It has left in their soul its scars, its deep scars; but when all is said, through it all has gone a thread of brave and splendid friendship from those few and rare men and women of white skins, North and South who have dared to know and help and love black folk. (*Black* 579)

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