

Race in the Visual Culture of White Fraternalism from the Gilded Age to World War I

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Before I begin, I should say that today's presentation contains a large amount of graphic racist visual material from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, today will be a bit of a gallop through my recent research that was made possible by the AAST fellowship.

[SLIDE 2] When I had the opportunity to address the African and African American Studies Program last year, I spoke about the ritual work of Moses Dickson, founder of the International Order of Twelve of Knights and Daughters of Tabor. Then, I argued that Dickson's ritual milieu offered one of the earliest examples of popular Afrocentrism, predating Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association by more than three decades. **[SLIDE 3]** Dickson's work and that of his Order was all the more remarkable because it found its greatest strength not in large urban centers, but in small to mid-sized towns of the mid-South and Midwest.

This summer, with the support of an AAST fellowship, I was able to examine the flip side of fraternalism and race. In archives in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, I found a stunning amount of material relating to how the popular tropes of the scientific racism of Social Darwinism were incorporated into the rituals of working and lower-middle-class fraternal groups at the very time the legal framework for Jim Crow was being assembled. **[SLIDE 4]** I would argue that many white fraternal organizations acted as key sites for popularizing "scientific racism." It is unlikely that the name of Yale scholar William Graham Sumner was on the lips of the average laborer or shopkeeper, but the ritual milieu of fraternalism provided a way to transmit these ideas to a popular

audience. In the revision of their ritual texts during the closing years of the nineteenth century and in the costumes, backdrops, and magic lantern slides they used to reinforce the message of the text, fraternal groups brought a new emphasis on racial hierarchy to Americans who were unlikely to be reading Sumner or Sir Francis Galton, who coined the term eugenics in his 1883 *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*.¹

To give some idea of the pervasiveness of the fraternal phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century, the first edition of the *Cyclopaedia of Fraternities*, published in 1899, claimed that forty percent of American men over the age of twenty-one belonged to one or more of the 350 adult fraternal organizations of various types. Women accounted for only 500,000 members of these groups.² [SLIDE 5] Historian Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch has argued convincingly that before the Civil War, Freemasons and Odd Fellows were already helping to reshape male identity in the South to stress whiteness rather than class in order to mitigate the tensions caused by the market revolution.³ In the years after the war, there would be tension between groups stressing similar themes and those attempting to create worker and farmer identities built around the dignity of labor and ideas of social transformation. In the 1880s and 1890s, this second group of organizations such as the Knights of Labor, the Knights of Honor, and the Woodmen of the World provided a framework that sometimes allowed Americans to bridge race, class, and religion as they debated the boundaries of the public and private spheres. But, as the Gilded Age moved into the Progressive Era, a rising tide of racism and nativism in both newer and older

¹ Francis Galton, *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development* (Macmillan, 1883), p. 24-25.

² Albert Clark Stevens, *The Cyclopædia of Fraternities; a Compilation of Existing Authentic Information and the Results of Original Investigation as to More than Six Hundred Secret Societies in the United States* (New York city, Paterson, N.J., Hamilton printing and publishing company, 1899), pp. v, xvi, 5; *Twelfth Census of the United States – 1900 Census Reports Volume II – Population Part II*, pp. 112, 118.

³ Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch, *Brothers of a Vow: Secret Fraternal Orders and the Transformation of White Male Culture in Antebellum Virginia* (University Of Georgia Press, 2011).

organizations would drown out older calls for workmen's solidarity and prepare the way for the triumph of Jim Crow and the rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan. Today, I will limit my examples of this ritualization of racism to the International Order of Odd Fellows and the United American Mechanics.

Odd Fellows

[SLIDE 6] As noted above, the International Order of Odd Fellows predates the Civil War, having been founded as a working-class organization in the U.K. in 1810. The Odd Fellows came to the U.S. in 1819 and became independent of the British group in 1843, both because of their desire to develop a more elaborate ritual and because their aspirations to middle class respectability put them at odds with the boisterous tavern culture of their British brothers.⁴ By 1897, they were the reputed to be the largest fraternal organization in the U.S, with a membership of 810,000 compared to Freemasonry's 750,000 members.⁵

[SLIDE 7] The early American Odd Fellows rituals mixed a stress on the virtues of friendship, love, and truth, each being taught in a separate degree ritual, with a ritual milieu that exemplified what one scholar has called "democratizing monarchy." The members' elevation from their middle and working-class daily lives was signified by elaborately embroidered aristocratic, priestly, and military costumes similar to those found in Freemasonry's Scottish and York Rites. In the 1820s, a new series of three "Encampment Degrees" used the mythology of the Biblical patriarchs to elevate members to the status of "Patriarchs Militant,"⁶ though the

⁴ Mark C Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 25-28.

⁵ *Ibid*, 171, n. 1.

⁶ Craig Heimbichner and Adam Parfrey, *Ritual America: Secret Brotherhoods and Their Influence on American Society: A Visual Guide* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Feral House, 2012), p. 12.

earliest forms of these rituals are described as being mere skeletons. Further revisions were made to these in 1835 and 1845.⁷ Following the major revision of the degrees in 1880, one author described the new ceremonies as having “clothed what was then a mere fragment, or skeleton, with beauty and solemnity.”⁸

[SLIDE 8] Whatever their beauty and solemnity to modern eyes, these revised rituals certainly reflect contemporary white social anxiety. White supremacy is valorized in the Encampment’s Golden Rule Degree in its description of the costuming before any words are spoken. Four of five imagined races of the world are given an exotic costume denoting their utter separation from American culture. Of the white race, the ritual says only that those representing it “may wear the usual dress.”⁹ [SLIDE 9] To make the lesson visually clearer, the representatives of the races are grouped in a descending order along the south side of the lodge room from whites, standing nearest to the chief patriarch’s chair, to brown, to yellow, to red, to representatives of the black race standing nearest the lodge door.¹⁰ [SLIDE 10] To make these distinctions clearer still, fraternal regalia catalogs offered painted backdrops of “racial habitats” to place behind each racial grouping, with those for the brown and yellow races depicting highly Orientalized structures, while the black race was given a grass hut surrounded by jungle.¹¹

⁷ Jonathan Blanchard, *Revised Odd-Fellowship Illustrated: The Complete Revised Ritual of the Lodge, Encampment, Patriarchs Militant, and the Rebekah Degrees* (Chicago, E.A. Cook, 1893), <http://archive.org/details/revisedoddfellow00blanrich>, 453-455.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁹ Jonathan Blanchard, *Revised Odd-Fellowship Illustrated: The Complete Revised Ritual of the Lodge, Encampment, Patriarchs Militant, and the Rebekah Degrees* (Chicago, E.A. Cook, 1893), <http://archive.org/details/revisedoddfellow00blanrich>, 189.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹¹ The Ward-Stillson Co., *[I.O.O.F.] Encampment Goods & Supplies. Catalog No. 43* (New London, OH: The Ward-Stillson Co., 1911), p. 38-39.

Lest the initiate worry that the white race might be inferior to the brown race for its proximity to the Middle-Eastern location of the Patriarchal degree stories, he was assured in the introduction of the white race that its origin lay in the “region once occupied by Adam, Noah and Abraham, but now overrun by semi-barbarous hordes,” reducing the current Arab occupants to the role of usurpers of a historically white land and its stories.¹²

[SLIDE 11] The brown and yellow races are given suitable Orientalist flourishes, being praised for their “grand temples” and “mysterious . . . handiwork.”¹³ The appraisal of the black race is much harsher, with the initiate being told:

It inhabits, as hordes, the wilds of Africa. In general they are barbarians and monsters in the practice of the most dire rapine; yet some of them are more gentle-as the Nubians, who dwell upon the burning sands of the Equator and dance to the music of a reed beneath the spreading palm.¹⁴

The description seems to imply that, at best, the black race may rise to some degree of the exoticism of the brown and yellow races.

In this one degree ceremony, we find contemporary racial ideals with the accompanying assurances of white supremacy artfully packaged in a memorable ritual format. The initiate is assured of his superior position both to African Americans and to other groups entering the American consciousness in the age of empire. He is reassured that his mission of civilizing dominance is required by nature and therefore its success and continued dominance is assured.

United American Mechanics

¹² Blanchard, *Revised Odd-Fellowship Illustrated*, 189-190.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

[SLIDE 12] The Ancient Order of United American Mechanics had its beginnings in the Know-Nothing movement of the 1840s, disparaging employers who hired immigrant labor rather than native-born workers. Congruent with this, the early mechanics were ardent anti-Catholics and avid supporters of the use of the Protestant Bible in the public schools. While thoroughly nativist, the early order's racial views were not nearly so hardened as they would later become.¹⁵ In a book of resolutions by Pennsylvania chapters memorializing the assassination of Lincoln in 1865, the fallen president is hailed as a "liberator of the oppressed," a victim of the "slave power," and "an apostle of the equality of labor."¹⁶

[SLIDE 13] In 1853, the Mechanics chartered a branch for young men called the Junior Order of United American Mechanics. By 1885, the popularity of the Junior Order was such that it became an independent order with "Junior" no longer referring to the age of its members and "Mechanics" no longer restricting the occupations of its membership. The Junior Order eventually subsumed the smaller membership of the original order and, by 1900, membership surpassed 200,000.¹⁷

[SLIDE 14] Perhaps as a result of the perceived successes of the Knights of Labor and portions of the People's Party in taking a more moderate racial stance, some within the Junior Mechanics proposed a more liberal position on African-American membership. The minutes of the 1894 National Session held in Ashville, North Carolina, report taking up "the old question of eligibility to membership of any one with other racial blood in him other than 'white.'" The majority held the line, passing a motion clarifying that "an applicant with any African blood in

¹⁵ Alvin J. Schmidt, *Fraternal Organizations* (Greenwood, 1980), p. 171-172.

¹⁶ Order of United American Mechanics. State Council of Pennsylvania, *In Memoriam : Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States* (Philadelphia : Geo. Hawkes, Jr., 1865), <http://archive.org/details/inmemoriamabraha00orde>, p. 35, 38, 80.

¹⁷ Schmidt, *Fraternal Organizations*, p. 171-172.

him was ineligible to membership.”¹⁸ Racial thought among the Junior Mechanics would only become more hardened in passing years.

[SLIDE 15] By the 1909 revision of the Junior Mechanics ritual, the initiation into the second Degree of Liberty had become an elaborate affair. Based on the story of the founders of New England, the Puritan candidate made a symbolic journey clinging to the mast of a boat in the middle of the lodge. During the initiation, he was admonished that, in the land he was founding

law will mean not the heavy hand of power, but the even hand of justice. May you fulfill the high destiny of your blood and race. You will now be conducted to the sacred altar upon which you will be obligated as a free man in your new land of liberty.¹⁹

The combination of whiteness, in the exaltation of blood and race, and of laissez-faire, in the exaltation of a light-handed government in a land of liberty, show how completely any older producerist or more radical labor thought and any racial optimism had been banished from the Mechanics’ thinking by the twentieth century. [SLIDE 16] In a 1909 regalia catalog, one sees that the some of the initiators’ costumes for other degrees had a startling degree of menace and seem to echo the dress of the members of the First Ku Klux Klan and anticipate the uniforms of the Second Klan’s elite vigilante group [SLIDE 17], the Black Legion.²⁰

¹⁸ M. D. (Marcellus Deaves) Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order United American Mechanics of the United States of North America* (Philadelphia : Press of J. B. Lippincott company, 1909), p. 335.
<http://archive.org/details/historyofjunioro00lich>.

¹⁹ “The Nativist Orders,” *Phoenix Masonry*, accessed February 6, 2016,
http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/fraternalism/jr_aoum.htm.

²⁰ The C. E. Ward Company, *Ward’s Catalog Jr. O.U.A.M. Regalia, Costumes, and Supplies, No. 25* (New London, OH: The C. E. Ward Company, 1909), p. 11; “History: The Black Legion, Where Vets and the Klan Met,” *Veterans Today*, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.veteranstoday.com/2012/11/28/history-the-black-legion-where-vets-and-the-klan-met/>.

[SLIDE 18] This shift in perspective and blending of old and new causes can also be seen in a pamphlet published by the Junior Workmen to address Colorado's Ludlow Massacre in 1914. Describing themselves as "professional men, workingmen, and business men," the Denver Council describes the miner's camp at Ludlow as "an armed camp under strict control of the Union leaders and was peopled ... 'ignorant, lawless and savage South European peasants.' They spoke twenty or more different languages, and most of them could not speak English at all. While they were of many nationalities the Greeks predominated, especially as a fighting force."²¹

Technology and the Magic Lantern

[SLIDE 19] But, if the Mechanics looked back to an imagined golden age of American Anglo-Saxon purity, they eagerly embraced the authority of technology to validate their message, a theme which recurs across the fraternal landscape. We have already seen several examples of illustrations of costumes and backdrops available from the fraternal regalia catalogs of the period, but fraternal members were equally interested in props and special effects to bring their rituals alive and drive their points home. Here, we see an illustration of the wheeled Puritan boat used in the Junior Mechanic's second degree and, [SLIDE 20] lest the simulated bucking of the waves not be enough, the facing page offers an elaborate wind machine, a lightning transparency, and flash torches and powder to make the most of the initiate's experience.²²

²¹ Junior Order United American Mechanics. Denver. Kensington Council No. 16, *Statement of the Strike Situation in Colorado ... a Report of the Special Committee Appointed to Investigate and Report to Kensington Council No. 16, Junior Order United American Mechanics, Denver, Colorado* ([Denver, Printed by E. L. Wepf], c1914), <http://archive.org/details/statementofstrik00junirich>, 1-2.

²² The C. E. Ward Company, *Ward's Catalog Jr. O.U.A.M. Regalia, Costumes, and Supplies, No. 25* (New London, OH: The C. E. Ward Company, 1909), p. 23-24.

[SLIDE 21] Nowhere is this fascination with technology more apparent than the embrace of magic lantern technology. Largely forgotten today, these precursors of the moving picture were a significant form of popular entertainment as well as an important form of popular instruction for traveling lecturers, Sunday schools, and most every imaginable civic group.

[SLIDE 22] Between 1881 and 1920, Joseph Boggs Beale, America's most famous creator of slide art, produced at least 258 sets of magic lantern slides illustrating everything from folk tales to Bible stories to fraternal rituals. [SLIDE 23] Only a few Junior Mechanics slides for the first degree, drawn between 1917 and 1920 are known to survive. These portray ten scenes including the ideal home and the immigrant threat.²³

[SLIDE 24] Other slide sets give us an idea of fraternal content and how it was reinforced by sharing illustrators who also produced religious, historical, and scientific material.

[SLIDE 25] In these two slides, on the left, we see Beale's portrayal of a white American missionary single-handedly teaching the peoples of the world in a slide set on the Lord's Prayer. On the right, Beale portrays an African American under the power of a whiskey demon in a slide set for an unknown temperance fraternity.²⁴ [SLIDE 26] Other slides were cruder and more direct, as is seen in this 1887 cartoon set of the "Dark Town Lodge," an adaptation of Currier & Ives Darktown series, which was popular with white fraternal lodges.²⁵

In their role as avid consumers and popularizers of the latest technologies, we see these fraternalists tension as they attempt to balance between purportedly timeless values and the contemporary imperative to champion progress qua progress. I argue that this appeal to the

²³ Terry Borton and Deborah Borton, *Before the Movies: American Magic-Lantern Entertainment and the Nation's First Great Screen Artist, Joseph Boggs Beale*, 2014, p. 160-161.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁵ "The Lincoln-Darwin Bicentennial," *The Magic Lantern Gazette* 20, no. 4 (2008), 11; Library of Congress Online Prints and Photographs Catalog, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002699714/>.

authority of technology is in the same vein as these groups' appeals to the authority of racial science, a tension between modernity and the desire for a fixed society aptly elucidated by Nancy Maclean in *Beyond the Veil of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*.²⁶

Preparing the Way for the Second Ku Klux Klan

[SLIDE 27] At this point in the presentation, it will likely come as no surprise that the Junior Mechanics played an important role in the spread of the Second Ku Klux Klan after its founding in 1915. [SLIDE 28] As I have attempted to show today, the Second Klan did not arise from a vacuum or from a sudden enthusiasm for D. W. Griffith's film "Birth of a Nation," but from a national fraternal culture that had spent decades preparing the ground for its emergence. [SLIDE 29] In Georgia, Junior Mechanics and the Klan would jointly publish the newspaper *The Searchlight* from 1921 under the motto "Free Speech: Free Press: White Supremacy."²⁷ By 1923, the paper claimed a national readership of 68,000 and served as a model for later Klan publications around the country.²⁸ [SLIDE 30] In that same year, Georgia Klan leaders proposed the establishment of "The Great American Fraternity," combining the Klan, the Junior Mechanics, the Odd Fellows and nine other nativist and mainstream fraternal organizations. *The Nation* called the proposed organization "a super-organization of haters."²⁹ While the grand

²⁶ Nancy K. Maclean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1995).

²⁷ Scott M. Cutlip, *The Unseen Power: Public Relations: A History* (Routledge, 2013), p. 399-400.

²⁸ Felix Harcourt, "Journalism of a Peculiar Sort: Ku Klux Klan Newspapers in the 1920s" (American Journalism Historians Association, New Orleans, LA, 2013), https://www.academia.edu/4738422/_Journalism_of_a_Peculiar_Sort_Ku_Klux_Klan_Newspapers_in_the_1920s, p 2-3.

²⁹ Charles P. Sweeney, "The Great Bigotry Merger," *The Nation*, July 5, 1922, p. 8-10, quote, p. 10. https://books.google.com/books?id=nOk_AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=%22great+american+fraternity%22&source=bl&ots=5Dh3hhsMRQ&sig=prDxRS0k8oCc8GLqZRbw82Xbso&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiu9f279ubKAhUKwiYKHf8pCVEQ6AEITAB#v=onepage&q=%22great%20american%20fraternity%22&f=false.

fraternal alliance failed, the attempt shows the degree to which the Second Klan rightly knew itself to be the progeny of earlier fraternal orders. [SLIDE 31]