

UC Santa Cruz

UC Santa Cruz Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Manifesting Destiny: Performance and the Myth of America

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/085809q0>

Author

Miller, Alexander Williams

Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA CRUZ

Manifesting Destiny: Performance and the Myth of America

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree of

MASTER OF ARTS in
THEATER STUDIES by
ALEXANDER WILLIAMS MILLER
June 2014

The Thesis of Alexander Miller is approved:

Professor Michael Chemers, Chair

Professor Shelley Fisher Fishkin

Professor Kimberly Jannarone

Tyrus Miller
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Copyright © by
Alexander W. Miller
2014

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Part I: Methodology	3
Part II: The Indian Princess	16
Part III: Is He Dead?	28
Part IV: Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	42
Conclusion: The Final Frontier...	52
Bibliography	55

Abstract

Manifesting Destiny: Performance and the Myth of America

by Alexander W. Miller

Cultures are defined by their boundaries. American culture often calls this boundary “the frontier,” and has built a strong mythic interpretation of this frontier. People living on this frontier behave in ways that may not be considered “civilized.” Borrowing from Roach’s work in performance theory, this paper analyzes three performative products to show how this American frontier has changed. J.N. Barker’s *The Indian Princess* performs the frontier through the legends of John Smith, Pocahontas, and colonial Jamestown. Mark Twain’s *Is He Dead?* is a play that echoes frontier dramas of 1880s America. The video game *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag* offers a historiographic view of the frontier while pushing it into cyberspace.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to all who have assisted me in the creation of this paper, in particular my advisor Michael Chemers, Kimberly Jannarone, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Brandon Barón, and Angela Beck. My thanks also to the University of California Santa Cruz MA Theater Arts class of 2014: Wendy Burr, Amelia Wade, Jessica Greenstreet, Daniella Zuccolotto, Katherine Burris, Stephanie Lee, and Ken Chang. Lastly, thank you to my family for your love and support through all my endeavors.

Introduction

It goes without saying that all of the people, living, dead, and otherwise in this story are fictional or used in a fictional context. Only the gods are real.

-Neil Gaiman, from the introduction to *American Gods*.

This paper tracks the performance and manifestations of a mythology inherent to the American psyche: the frontier. Throughout American history, the frontier has remained a permanent, though protean, concept. It has grown, shrunk, divided, and disappeared, but the frontier has always been accompanied by a set of moral codes and behaviors. As America continues to recreate itself, these frontier behaviors have served as a set of guiding principles. These attitudes have allowed the United States to accomplish a great deal in a historically short amount of time, but they also cast a long shadow over how Americans consider themselves today. The frontier may be officially gone, but its effects still dominate the American cultural consciousness.

The frontier has often been the subject of American theater. The late 19th century was awash with exhibitions and shows that depicted the trials and triumphs of the great cowboys, settlers, and cavalrymen of the United States against “the savage redskins of the West.” Arguably the most famous of these was *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, starring the singular William “Buffalo Bill” Cody. While Cody and his ilk have monopolized the conversation surrounding the performance of the frontier, the American frontier is pervasive. It finds itself embodied in the most surprising of

places and cultural artifacts. This paper focuses on some of these surprising manifestations. Looking at three theatrical artifacts that manifest the frontier, its growth and evolution can be tracked from a simple tool of defining American identity to a polymorphous digital entity that paradoxically affords Americans independence and a right to infringe upon the independence of others.

Part I: Methodology

Frontier Theory

In his paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” presented at the American Historical Association in Chicago on July 12, 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner defined American development as the colonization of the free, open land that comprised “The Great West.”¹ This observation backed up not only the irrefutable evidence of the American settler movement, but its language also folded in colonial history. The English, Spanish, and French domination of the land that would become the United States became part of the continuum that would lead to the bridging of the Atlantic and Pacific. Center stage of this development was what Turner deemed “The Frontier.” This statement became the groundwork for Turner’s “Frontier Theory,” the first time that a historian classified the importance of the Frontier on American culture.

Turner defines multiple American frontiers: cultural, economic, and political. The cultural frontier connects most strongly to the colonial implications from Turner’s earlier statement. This frontier is defined by its development:

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character...In this

¹ Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tuscon: University of Arizona, 1986), 1.

advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave —
the meeting point between savagery and civilization.
(Turner, 2-3)

Turner defines the frontier as a wave rather than a single line, moving forward and receding with each successive tide. He classifies this as a distinctly American state of being, given America's proximity to what he refers to as "The Great West." This "Great West" is home to the uncivilized, the primitive in all its forms. Each frontier wave takes the civilized inhabitants of the European east and drops them amidst, to quote Shakespeare, a "brave new world."

The constant give and take of civilization and savagery is core to Turner's frontier theory, and it remains a seed of understanding the performance of the frontier. When a wave of immigrants first arrives on the frontier, Turner defines them as still part of a civilized, European world. Their exposure to the primitive that exists on the other side of this frontier strips away the European influence and replaces it with a distinctly "savage" approach to life: "It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him....he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man" (4). Turner demonstrates several key features of his frontier in this statement. First is an expectation of violence. The Indian palisade refers to a common and easily produced wall of defense that has been in use since the ancient Greeks, created with the strongest materials found on hand. This envisioning of a walled compound would only find traction in a hazardous environment, or an

environment envisioned to be hazardous. As expectation of violence often begets violence, Turner's besieged settler finds himself taking scalps from the Indians that threaten his palisade, at the same time using the same Indian knowledge to build his log cabin. It is interesting to note Turner's use of both the Cherokee and Iroquois as tribal examples of the Indian other. Their geographic distance implies a universality to the frontier experience: the log cabin in the Iroquois forests of New York is the same as the log cabin in Cherokee lands in North Carolina or Arkansas. This leads to the second feature of Turner's frontier image: a dependence on the local resources. As mentioned above, the palisade is made from materials on hand and created for a local threat. The log cabin it protects is also made from the same on-hand lumber, clearing a field to both have better line of sight and to begin to cultivate crops. Another feature of Turner's frontier is implied by the final sentence; while this dangerous environment may be too much for the early settler, he will someday come to master it. The civilized settlers are reduced to nothing, and over time they master their surroundings.

The civilizing cycle in Turner's frontier builds into the ever changing nature of the frontier. In his paper, Turner describes not only the conceptual frontiers of America (political, economic, and social), but he also gives specific locations to the frontier. The earliest frontier in America that Turner maps is the Atlantic coastline, occupied by settlers and explorers who eventually pursue their Indian trading partners further into the interior. It is their trading posts, cities such as Pittsburgh, St. Louis,

and Chicago, that Turner sees as the first markers of the constantly growing frontier.² As the wave of civilization washes over the frontier, those markers are placed farther into the west. By 1820, forty years after the birth of the United States and seventy years before Turner's thesis, the frontier was marked by the Mississippi River.³ Turner marks another change in the frontier by 1880, when 18th century Adirondack trading posts have given way to the mines and ranches of Colorado and the Great Plains. Most interestingly, by 1890, Turner notes that the Census Bureau can no longer define a single frontier line, given the scattered nature of the settlements in what Turner deems "The West" (14). A clear progression is at play here. For Turner, the frontier exists as a physical line drawn by the constant wave of civilization: the log cabin is eventually replaced by the brick house, the Indian trail by the train track, and the backwater settlement is folded into civilization. Turner associates this advance with "the demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom" (22). The desire to live freely while at the same time taming the wilderness is what builds the tidal flow of Turner's frontier.

The demand for land and freedom on the frontier is accompanied by the financial interests of the settlers. Turner's tracking of the early frontier acknowledges the importance of the European fur trade as the cause for founding some of the

² Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tuscon: University of Arizona, 1986), 14.

³ Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tuscon: University of Arizona, 1986), 6.

earliest frontier settlements. Turner places these traders as the forerunners for the farmers that would eventually anchor the frontier's transformation. He also notes a correlation between the advance of these European traders with an Indian arms race; the traders provide their Indian allies with firearms, who use them to gain supremacy over their unarmed adversaries.⁴ These early frontiersmen create fundamental shifts in local power balances for their own benefit; the tribes they arm become more powerful and are able to sell these traders more furs. The traders then ship these furs back to Europe, where they are sold at a profit. Here on this economic frontier is a direct connection between the violence of the frontier and financial gain. These fur traders are not so much interested in settling as they are finding their own El Dorado. As the frontier farmer enters this scene, he follows the path of the trappers, and is forced to contend with the Indian tribes who are now armed, leading to the further violence and the Indian stockade mentioned earlier. Even these frontier farmers are not without financial motivations. The land that they have now defended is used to farm (or mine, depending on the frontier), providing a source of sustenance and/or income that is entirely theirs. The movement of the frontier, then, is driven by the twin engines of conflict and wealth.

Encompassing all of Turner's frontier theory is the hegemonic nature of this frontier. The immigrant waves along the frontier mentioned earlier were precisely

⁴ Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1986), 13.

that: European immigrants finding new homes deeper and deeper in the American continent. Turner identifies the Scotch-Irish, English, and Germans as the dominant ethnicities that defined the frontier image. While these different groups found their own areas of colonization, the poorest of each found themselves mingling on the frontier. These were often the freed indentured servants from the settlements along the coast. Over time, Turner believed: “in the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (23). Turner places great value on the frontier as an American construct. The various individuals and cultures that find themselves drawn there share a common experience. With the breakdown of civilization what is built in its place is something entirely new. Turner claims that this entirely new civilization is truly American by noting its difference to America’s former colonial overlords. This “composite nationality,” as Turner calls it, is a distinct feature of the United States, indicating that as the frontier moves in time and space, it carries less European and more American influence.⁵ On a deeper psychological level, the frontier’s “wilderness freedom” allows for personal reinvention. The English servant, the Irish rogue, or the German farmer all come to the frontier with their own identities, but they are able to reshape them repeatedly as they see fit, so long as they accept the frontier with all its opportunities and dangers. In this way, the frontier is in part alchemical, able to

⁵ Frederick J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1986), 23.

transform those who live on it into something of their own creation, while at the same time imprinting a portion of their identity with a mark that is quintessentially American. This reinvention can be used by unscrupulous characters to perpetuate a life of fraud and skullduggery, hence the popularity of confidence artists in frontier literature. Not all confidence artists exist on the frontier, but all of those on the frontier do engage in their brands of confidence artistry. It is this fluid identity, furthermore, that facilitates the fusion of formally distinct national identities through shared adventures into a new American national identity.

Vortices of Behavior

In his 1996 book, “Cities of the Dead,” Joseph Roach describes a method of performative analysis he calls “Genealogies of Performance.” Roach uses these to track “the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practice through collective representations.”⁶ The collective representations that Roach describes here are comprised of performances (defined as self-consciously theatrical, though by no means limited to the theater) that impress upon the audience the importance of “restored behavior.” This is a concept Roach borrows from the work of Richard Shechner and uses to ground his concept of performance: “performance, in other words, stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and replace” (3). These performance genealogies are also used to address

⁶ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 25.

“Counter-Memories:” instances where the performed “collective representation” of a history is different from the history that has been created through academic discourse.⁷ When viewed with this “collective representation,” the “Elusive Entity”

⁷ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 26.

Roach mentions can be best understood. It is a fleeting glimpse of the originating idea that a performance has been built around.⁸

⁸ An example of this “Elusive Entity,” would be the 2013 productions of William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III*, directed by Tim Carroll and starring Mark Rylance. In the words of the show’s press release, Carroll’s *Twelfth Night* attempts to pull back the veil of time:

Twelfth Night and *Richard III* are both presented with an extraordinary all-male company playing both male and female roles, as the plays were originally staged in Shakespeare’s day. The productions are filled with music, played live by seven musicians on traditional Elizabethan instruments in a gallery above the stage, and are lit almost exclusively by the glow of 100 on-stage candles, adding to the intimate and authentic atmosphere. Entering the theatre, audiences will also witness the pre-show ritual of actors dressing and preparing their make-up on stage, adding to the unique and immersive theatrical experience.

These productions are attempting what is at once both impossible and inevitable for theater.

While true that the Lord Chamberlain’s men did use an all male cast, it is historically well documented that the female roles were played by the younger members of the troupe. The gender-blind casting, the “traditional Elizabethan instruments” and costumes, and the “100 on-stage candles” are all attempts by Carroll and this production to reembody the “elusive entity” of Shakespearean theater. The *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare performed five centuries ago is five centuries dead; Shakespeare’s first *Twelfth Night* died the same day it was born. Every production since, up to and including the original run of *Twelfth Night* is, in some way, reembodying it in a futile struggle to “get back to the Garden,” as Joni Mitchell’s timeless song puts it. Carroll’s 2013 production is another attempt at this embodiment and replacement, crafted to be “closer” to the “elusive entity,” to create a false continuity in the mind of the audience; people believe they are seeing a more “authentic” Shakespeare, and as a result the legacy of Shakespeare’s work is reaffirmed until the next embodiment.

Roach proposes that these performance genealogies can be understood through a concept called “vortices of behavior.” Vortices of behavior are Roach’s reimagining of French historian Pierre Nora’s “Places of Memory.”⁹ These vortices are areas where the restored behavior mentioned above can be manifested. They are the focal points of the various semiotic matrices that comprise any given culture. Roach provides multiple examples of these vortices: “the grand boulevard, the marketplace, the theater district, the square, the burial ground-where the gravitational pull of social necessity brings audiences together and produces performers...from their midst” (28). Roach’s vortices have a lot in common: they are all places where large crowds gather, all places where specific social cues and etiquettes are relied upon and enforced, and they are places where some method of performance is important. These constitute the connection between Roach’s vortices as the restored behaviors of Shechner’s performance theory. It opens the door for performance to mean more than a night at the theater: two gentleman engaging on the boulevard is as performative as a show at the Covent Garden.

These spatial performances are as dependent upon their audiences as their performers. The vortices of behavior that Roach provides as examples are all very public locations, inferring, and heavily depending upon, the possibility of a constant flow of participants. It does not matter if these participants are in on the performance

⁹ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 27.

or not. Their mere presence within a vortex indicates a silent consent to contribute to the cultural melee. In this way, the vortex becomes “a place in which everyday practices and attitudes may be legitimated, ‘brought out into the open,’ reinforced, celebrated or intensified” (28). The individuals that inhabit the vortex, however temporarily, legitimize the vortex. Their performances as both participants and observers add the layers that the cultural matrices depend on. When these behaviors are re-embodied at a later time, the matrices are recharged with new cultural meaning, which paradoxically creates a false continuity between the new meaning and the older performances.

The most important element of these vortices of behavior is their role in reinforcing cultural behaviors. In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach expounds upon one of his examples of behavioral vortices within Augustan London: the coffee/chocolate house. This location served as a focal point for gentlemen of means and opportunity to engage in culturally relevant and philosophical discussions, but also created a very unique opportunity for those who were well versed in performance:

As sites of performance themselves, the coffee and chocolate houses made the theater one of their most urgent topics. If differences between men are “meerly Scenical,” good behavior is available to anyone who can measure up to well-informed scrutiny As the legitimacy of the actor exists in validating gestures of performance, so individual behavior legitimates itself through speech and action on the stages of the public sphere...The London coffeehouse thus functioned in the role of behavioral vortex, a combination of built environment and perforative habit that facilitated not

simply the reproduction but also, according to circumstance and opportunity, the displacement of cultural transmission. (Roach, 85-86)

The most vital elements of Roach's performance theory are highlighted within these interactions. The coffeehouse serves as a behavioral vortex; it is a physical location that is accompanied by a set of cultural behaviors that can be performed and reproduced by anyone. Because of this, the participants within these coffee houses reaffirm those behaviors they perform as culturally noble behaviors. These individuals could in fact have no claim to the higher status of the nobility, but because of their performances as such, they have both subverted and reaffirmed that status. The theater, as another vital element of London society, is a home to those who can perform this status; in fact, many actors did on a nightly basis. Through their skill at restoring culturally legitimate behavior, actors illustrate the performative nature of these vortices. The lines between coffee house and theater space become blurred, with one taking on the aspects of the other. With the actor's ability to affirm social acceptability, the theater itself becomes another vortex of behavior: restoring the ever shifting cultural values discussed in the coffee house.

The restoration and re-embodiment of these vortices do not have to occur in the same location. Roach calls this phenomenon "displaced transmission." This transmission is usually a result of changing cultural conditions, either through migration (the culture being transplanted to a new location), immigration (the culture being exposed to another, forcing a change), or, more often than not, both at the same

time. Displaced transmission highlights some of the inherent paradoxes to understanding cultural performances. While the most popular and reaffirmed traditions and behaviors are transplanted through displaced transmission, these behaviors cannot be fully recreated, since nothing can be performed exactly the same way twice, “[behaviors] must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance” (29). The vortices of behavior are perfect places to track this constant reinvention of culture; they allow observation of both the cultural behaviors that remain over multiple iterations as well as the behaviors that shift and change.

Part II: The Indian Princess

In his preface to the 1808 publication of his play, *The Indian Princess*, James Nelson Barker was pessimistic in the estimation of his work. As a playwright, Barker understood the pitfalls of producing and publishing drama; his first two short plays have, to this day, never been produced.¹⁰ It seems only fair then for Barker to deliver a word of caution with his work:

In sending [*The Indian Princess*] to the press I am perfectly apprized of the probability that it goest only to add one more to the list of those unfortunate children of the American drama, who in the brief space that lies between their birth and death, are doomed to wander, without house or home, unknown and unregarded, or who, if heeded at all, are only picked up by some critic beadle to receive the usual treatment of vagrants.¹¹

This pessimism would be replaced by 1832 when, in a letter to William Dunlap, he claimed the play to have “been frequently acted in, I believe, all the theatres of the United States”(Moses, 570). With thirty years of reflection and response, it seems that Barker acknowledged the influence this “unfortunate child” had on American drama.

The Indian Princess represents ground zero for an American phenomenon. It is among the first plays, perhaps even the first play, to be based on the story of

¹⁰ Moses J. Montrose, “James Nelson Barker,” in *Representative Plays By American Dramatists*, Vol. 1, ed. Moses J. Montrose (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 567-571.

¹¹ James N. Barker, *The Indian Princess, or, La Belle Sauvage* (Philadelphia: T & G Palmer, 1808), in *Representative Plays By American Dramatists*, Vol. 1, ed. Moses J. Montrose (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 575.

America's early mythic heroes: John Smith and Pocahontas.¹² Written as a melodrama and scored by John Bray, the play begins with the Jamestown settlers, John Smith, John Rolfe, and their entourage arriving on the Powhatan River. As they plan their new settlement, some of the crew remain cautious of the savage Indians that inhabit the woods, but are confident in Smith's resume as a man of adventure:

WALTER: Tut, you haven't seen an inch yet of the whole hero...O! 'twould have made your blood frisk in your veins to have seen him in Turkey or Tatary, when he made the clumsy infidels dance to the music of his broad sword! (581)

Meanwhile, in the camp of Powhatan, the Indian king, princess Pocahontas prepares to be married to Miami, leader of a rival tribe. The scene then shifts to a lost Smith, ambushed by a hunting party led by Nantaquas, Pocahontas' brother and heir to Powhatan. Smith fights with such skill and ferocity, Nantaquas surrenders, believing Smith to be their god of war. Smith educates him on the nature of Smith's mission: "I left my own country to be the red man's friend...My king is a king of a mighty nation...he is great and good: go, said he, go and make the red men wise and happy" (587). While talking, Nantaquas' warriors seize Smith despite the protests of their prince. Back at the colony, Walter, a colonist, relays the loss of Smith to the Indians, as well as the deaths of several other men who fell victim to an Indian ambush. Rolfe immediately musters a rescue party to save Smith.

¹² H. Wiley Hitchcock, "An Early American Melodrama: The Indian Princess of J.N. Barker and John Bray," *Notes*, Second Series 12, No. 3 (Jun., 1955): 375.

Act II begins with Powhatan standing in judgement over Smith. Miami and Grimosco, Powhatan's high priest, call for his blood as vengeance for the Indians killed by the colonists, though Nantaquas vouches for Smith. Powhatan initially sides with Miami and calls for Smith's head, but Pocahontas, moved by her brother's account, puts herself between the executioners and Smith. Powhatan, stirred by his daughter's courage, releases Smith, telling his children to return him to the other colonists, who they find quickly. When the others leave, Rolfe and the Pocahontas, clearly both smitten at first glance, proclaim their love for one another. Miami enters, having seen the two lovers embrace. The princess rebuffs her fiancé and Miami, furious and humiliated, returns to his people to make ready for war. Pocahontas takes the news of her love to her father, who promises that she will not have to marry Miami, even if it means war. The act ends with Powhatan calling his warriors, and their new English allies, to wipe out Miami's people.

Act III opens in a newly built Jamestown. The war between Miami and Powhatan has ended. Powhatan and the colonists have captured Miami and secured the treasures of many tribes beyond Powhatan's lands. As the conquering heroes return to the colony, news arrives that ships have arrived from England, bearing a new governor for the colony and five hundred men. Rolfe and Pocahontas find a moment alone in a grove to express their affections before Rolfe leaves to prepare for a victory banquet. Pocahontas remains behind and spies Miami accompanying Powhatan's priest, Grimosco, who reveal they are in league to drive out the colonists. When

Powhatan arrives, Grimosco implies that with the destruction of his rivals, Powhatan will soon be overthrown by the colonists and the only solution to this is to kill their leaders at the banquet. Powhatan, afraid and convinced by his close advisor, agrees to the plan. When Powhatan leaves, Miami demands Grimosco free him, so that Miami may eat Rolfe's heart at the banquet. Pocahontas, frightened, runs to tell Rolfe and the others, but only finds the new governor, Delawar. She tells him of the plot and they depart for Powhatan's banquet. At the banquet, Powhatan is nervous due to the colonist's refusal to be parted with their weapons, but eventually sits them all on one side of the table. Behind the colonists, Grimosco places his warriors with weapons drawn, while Powhatan keeps them occupied. As the conspirators are about to strike, Pocahontas and Delawar arrive and foil the assassination. Miami, in his rage, kills himself. Powhatan is forgiven by Smith for his role in the betrayal, and the curtain closes on a rousing finale celebrating the settlers and their new colony.

By the time he wrote *The Indian Princess*, the twenty five year old Barker was juggling an artistic career with a burgeoning career in public service. James' father, John Barker, had served in the Continental Army before becoming a three term mayor of Philadelphia, a title he held in the years surrounding the production of *The Indian Princess*. The younger Barker, at the behest of his father, travelled to Washington in 1809 to gain experience in politics, and in the War of 1812, would distinguish himself

as an officer in the artillery.¹³ His career as a playwright preceded his rise in service by four years with his writing of *Spanish Rover*, a one act play based on the work of Cervantes, in 1805. Barker's interests in playwriting reflect a diverse and inquisitive mind. Comprised of masques, tragedies, comedies and melodramas, Barker's body of work runs the gamut of themes as well as genre, with work based on poetic symbolism, historical individuals like Attila the Hun, and adaptations of contemporary novels and plays.¹⁴

When Barker had originally envisioned *The Indian Princess*, he had planned it to be a comedy. It was only at the request of John Bray, the in house composer of the Chestnut Street Theater in Philadelphia, that he make his script a libretto to be scored by Bray himself. Barker claims in his preface that his inspiration and material came solely from John Smith's *General History of Virginia*, published in 1624. However, many liberties have been taken with the accounted history, and it is possible Barker found alternative sources of inspiration in the popular literature of the day.¹⁵

The play premiered at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia on April 6, 1808, and featured Mr. Bray himself in a supporting role. The initial audience seemed to have been large, given the records of an incident involving an actor being harassed

¹³ John W. Crowley, "James Nelson Barker in Perspective," *Educational Theatre Journal* 24, no. 4 (Dec., 1972): 364.

¹⁴ Moses J. Montrose, "James Nelson Barker," in *Representative Plays By American Dramatists*, Vol. 1, ed. Moses J. Montrose (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 567-568.

¹⁵ Arthur Hobson Quinn, *History of the American Drama, from the Beginning to the Civil War*; (New York: Appelton-Century-Crofts 1923), 139.

on stage by an audience member who seemed to object to their portrayal of an Irishman. The incident caused the stage hands to run down the curtain early, almost resulting in a riot.¹⁶ The show continued to run in Philadelphia, with records of it appearing in theaters in New York, Maryland, and Washington.

Though written eighty-three years before Turner's frontier theory, the production and popularity of *The Indian Princess* indicates a powerful connection between the nascent American theatre movement and the frontier. Turner himself freely admits the importance of the Atlantic coastline as the first American frontier: the border that divides the Europeans and the Indian forests. Barker's characters then form that first wave of European civilization washing through America. They are, in the strictest sense of the word, immigrants. The colonists consist of the British equivalent of a rainbow coalition: English, Irish, and Scots all working together to build the village. Smith recognizes his crew as the people that will shape the future of the country:

Men born for acts of hardihood and valour,
Whose stirring spirits scorn'd to lie inert,
Base atoms in the mass of population
That rots in stagnant Europe. Ye are men
Who a high wealth and fame will bravely win,
And wear full worthily. (Barker, 580)

Smith's call to his men hits each major point of Turner's overall notion of the frontiersmen. Most of the men present are nothing but common European stock: not

¹⁶ Arthur Hobson Quinn, *History of the American Drama, from the Beginning to the Civil War* (New York: Appelton-Century-Crofts 1923), 139.

just English, or Irish, but European, setting up the transformation from European to American. Through the foreseen shared hardships they will encounter, Smith sees that these men will earn wealth and status greater than any could hope to find in “stagnant Europe.”

The breakdown of these hardships and triumphs lines up almost perfectly with Turner’s frontier cycle. In act one, the colonists are deposited on the frontier with the European identities intact but little else. Despite the freedom that the frontier represents, there is a clear and present danger for these colonists:

ROLFE: In this free atmosphere and ample range
The bosom can dilate, the pulses play,
and man, erect, can walk a manly round.
ROBIN: *[Aside]* Aye, and be scalp’d and roasted by the
Indians.(580)

Even in this early moment of act one, *The Indian Princess* is drawing the powerful connections between the freedom of the frontier and the dangers it presents. The fear of the Indian other is present, though Robin, one of the servants in the camp, does not make it a part of the dialogue. Instead, he engages the audience with this fear, drawing them into an important conversation about the nature of this frontier. This connects Barker’s audience with this first stage of the frontier, but also implies that this Indian fear is not something discussed by these colonists, but is nonetheless foremost on their minds.

The deeper the colonists venture into the frontier, the more savage they must become. John Smith, as an Englishman already used to the hardships of conflict, is

ideally situated to be a frontiersman. In *The Indian Princess*, he is the first to come across the actualized Indian threat, an encounter with profound implications for both sides:

Re-enter SMITH, engaged with the Indians; several fall. Exeunt, fighting, and enter from the opposite side the Prince NANTAQUAS, who views with wonder the prowess of SMITH; when the music has ceased he speaks.

NANTAQUAS: Sure 'tis our war-god, Aresqui himself, who lays our chiefs low! Now they drop; he fights no longer; he stands terrible as the panther, which the fearful hunter dares not approach.(586)

In a display of swordsmanship that would leave Zorro on the floor, Smith takes on the greatest warriors Powhatan has to offer. Nantaquas, then, is excused in his belief that Smith is a manifestation of a war god. He compares Smith with a panther; an apex predator that would compete with those on this frontier for their most valuable resource: deer and elk. More importantly, Nantaquas' conflation of Smith and Aresqui demonstrates a blurring of the boundaries along this frontier. Smith's exposure to the frontier has made him not just a native of it, but one of its idols, to be revered as one of its dark gods.

By act three, we see a constructed Jamestown and a more pacified frontier thanks to the violence of the white colonists and the alliance with Powhatan. The settlers have now begun to relate tales of their exploits in the same way they have related Smith's adventures against the Turk:

WALTER: When we had given the enemies of our ally,
Powhatan, defeature, and sent the rough Miami in
Chains to Werocomoco...away we went on a voyage of
discovery. Some thousand miles we sailed, and many
stranger nations discovered...
ALICE: And what were your exploits?
WALTER: Rare ones, egad! We took the devil, Okee,
prisoner...His vot'ries Redeem'd him with some score
or two of deer-skins.(607)

Effectively, the frontiersmen are trading on violence against the Indians for knowledge and wealth from the Indians. They make a strong distinction in their conquests, their first being the enemies of their native allies. This echoes in Turner's understanding of the native/colonist economic relationships; the colonists provide the firepower and pick the winning team. In return, the settlers are given access to the wealth of the interior (if the "voyage of discovery" is meant to be their travels farther up the James River), namely the fur trade that Turner attaches to these early frontier forays. It is only once this outpost has been established that another wave arrives, led this time not by a military leader (Captain Smith), but by a politician (Governor Delawar). Smith, Rolfe, and Co. have tamed the wilds enough that the imposed order represented by European civilization is able to manifest itself.

Despite this taming, there is still some residue of the frontier impulses. At Powhatan's banquet, Smith and his company refuse to remove their swords at their host's insistence, saying, "Our swords are part of our apparel, king;/Nor need your people fear them. They shall rest/Peaceful within their scabbards" (624). By traditional European customs, the sword is a symbol of either the gentleman or the

soldier, sometimes both. Wearing arms at a formal celebration sets out Smith and his company, who had in act one been described as the “base atoms of Europe,” as having some semblance of prestige in this newly tamed frontier. The sword for them to this point has also been a very real and very vital tool of war, a powerful instance of semiotic ghosting that merges Turner’s scalp-taking settler with his landed farmer successor.

Barker’s *Indian Princess* sets the stage for a new conversation in this post-colonial United States: how will America repurpose its colonial heritage? Smith and company were, historically, subjects of the British crown. For them to become part of a collected American mythology, they must first shed that loyalty. Barker, while acknowledging their subservience to the crown in some places (such as Smith’s exposition for Nantaquas), accomplishes this by having Rolfe burn the metaphorical bridge upon their arrival in America, “Let our our dull, sluggish countrymen at home/ Still creep around their little isle of fogs,/ Drink its dank vapours, and then hang themselves” (580). Barker is using the settlers to create dichotomy between “us Americans” and “those English,” appropriate for one of the first plays written by an aspiring American politician specifically for an American audience. Barker has effectively repurposed colonial Jamestown as an American behavioral vortex. Within *The Indian Princess*, these historically british subjects have taken on particular American attitudes: a dismissive approach to England and an egalitarian approach to wealth and status being the major points. This re-embodiment of attitudes that

probably did not occur amongst the original settlers connects the early 19th century American collective representation of America with 16th century America.

The Indian Princess also manifests a monstrous entity for these early Americans: the Indian other. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his essay, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” posits that one of the major uses of monsters in cultural products is to police the boundaries of the culturally permitted. Because the monster dwells on the boundaries, any group that dwells on or beyond the boundary of another can be labeled as monstrous. The exact nature of their monstrosity will differ, as is the case with all cultural bodies, but it will allow those within the boundaries to address their fears of the unknown by making it known, by any means necessary.¹⁷ All of the Indians performed in *The Indian Princess* guard the boundaries to the wealth of the interior; Smith and his company must find some way to overcome the “savage peoples.” As they push deeper into the frontier, becoming more savage in their journey, Powhatan, as the first Indian chief they encounter, becomes less and less of the monstrous other, as he is replaced by Miami. Miami stands opposed to the mixing of native and European blood by threatening to kill Rolfe after he is engaged to Pocahontas, and actively leads the Indians against the settlers in war. This monstrous double standard finds a connection to the still expanding nature of the 19th century United States. Now free of English tyranny, and with the Mississippi river open to

¹⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Thesis)” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 8.

them thanks to the Louisiana Purchase, Americans needed a re-inscription of their cultural attitudes towards the natives of the lands they are about to seed. Barker has drawn from the mythic past of the American frontier to tell a story that was beginning to play out in his present: the unification of an American identity at the cost of British and European influence and Indian dominance of the American mainland.

Part III: *Is He Dead?*

Samuel Clemens began his performance as Mark Twain at a very curious time for the United States. Thousands had been born in this new frontier country, including Clemens, but the frontier was shrinking; the Indian population was becoming less of a problem and the middle parts of map were being filled in. Anxieties were beginning to spread, with Americans starting to ask, “What are we if not a frontier?” More and more, Americans found themselves looking beyond their ocean borders for the answers; the frontier tide was washing over larger parts of the world. It was in this world that Twain, far from his home, would pen *Is He Dead?*, one his many forays into the theater. This 1898 play demonstrates another stage in the growth of American frontier mythology, a stage that would see America’s frontier grow into an empire.

At first observation, *Is He Dead?* resembles a typical three-act melodrama. Set in Paris at some point during the 19th century, the story follows the adventures of the painter Jean François Millet and his artistic posse. As act one opens, Millet, his fiancée’s family, and most of Millet’s friends are in debt to Bastien André, a local art dealer and money lender. André is also in love with Millet’s fiancée, Marie, who continuously rebuffs André, despite his leverage over her father. Millet’s closest friend, the American artist Agamemnon Buckner (referred to as Chicago), reveals he has been making arrangements with all of the wealthy foreigners in Paris, inviting them to Millet’s studio for an exhibition auction. He quickly works with his friends and Millet’s pupils, instructing them in the art of selling paintings. As the exhibition

commences, André and his cronies devalue and disrupt every sale Chicago and company make. Once Millet himself finally arrives, André demands the money owed to him. Millet reminds him that André loaned him the money on account for all the paintings Millet produced in the year. André refuses them, citing that his contract reads that André could refuse the paintings and take the money, a technicality Millet claims was not in the original contract. Millet, defeated and ruined, resolves to take his own life to free Marie from her connection to him. He dismisses his friends, and he and his pupils gather around the lit brazier in his studio. Chicago, oblivious to his friend's near suicide, rushes into the studio with a new plan: for Millet to fake his own death and watch as the prices of his paintings shoot through the roof. The artists celebrate Chicago's brilliance and hold a mock memorial service for their recently "departed" comrade, Millet.

Act II opens one day later in Millet's studio. Most of the paintings that adorned its walls are either gone or marked with "SOLD" signs. Chicago and the older artists are instructing Millet's pupils while adding "SOLD" placards to more paintings on the wall. Chicago has placed news of Millet's "terminal illness" in a local paper, saying he has retired to the Barbary Coast to die, and that Millet's sister, the Widow Tillou, will be tending to her brother's affairs. Reporters arrive at the studio to verify Chicago's story, and the painters use this opportunity to slander André in the papers. As the reporters leave, the Widow Tillou enters: Millet in drag. He

complains about being trapped in his bedroom painting pictures, but Chicago

implores him to continue for at least three months:

CHICAGO: Now you mark my words—Three months from now we'll give you the biggest funeral that ever—*(Patting him on the shoulder)*—a funeral that you'll enjoy.

WIDOW: Oh,— —3 months!

CHICAGO: *(Lifting his hand—impressively)* And the minute you are dead you'll see the pictures jump to 50,000 francs a piece—you mark my words. (Twain, 64-65)

They are interrupted by the arrival of a group of merchants from the exhibition the day before. They attempt to purchase several paintings for the hundred francs agreed upon, but Chicago tricks them into an auction for one of the few “unsold” paintings of the “dying master,” Millet. The merchants bid and out-bid each other for the painting, eventually settling on 90,000 francs. Millet is then forced to invent the backstory of the Widow when Marie's mother, Madame Leroux, and her friends come to pay their condolences. As the ladies leave, André arrives to serve notice to Madame Leroux about her husband's overdue debts, which the Widow pays on the spot. After being worn down by the Widow's incessant barrage of shaming insults, André is convinced to take the pictures he promised to buy from Millet in lieu of any payments.

Act III begins three months later in the Widow's massive Parisian apartment. André, who is still entitled to millions of francs worth of Millet's paintings, has begun to make advances on the Widow. The Widow scolds André for his threat to take his contract with Millet to the courts unless he marries her. André reveals he forged the

contract, confirming Millet's suspicions, but quickly burns the paper while proclaiming his love for her. With Millet's problem solved, the Widow shoves André out of the apartment. Marie enters in mourning for her dead lover, who ironically consoles her in his disguise. Marie believes the Widow should marry André, on account that the good Widow will change the corrupt André. The Widow tells Marie to pass a message to André that he should slip into her chambers at ten in the evening and she will provide him an answer. Marie leaves the Widow to watch the funeral procession build on the Champs Elysées. Chicago and company arrive and inform Millet of the final preparations for his own funeral. Chicago's plan has worked: Millet's original paintings (some of which are copies) are selling for millions, and copies (which Millet himself is producing, making them originals) are selling for thousands. As a procession of noblemen pass by, Chicago announces the conclusion to their plan: after the funeral, Millet will assume the identity of Placide Duval, a rich imitator of Millet's work. Millet laments that this plan will have him never be accepted as the original again. They exit, and André enters, waiting for the Widow. He hides away when he hears the Widow coming, and watches as she enters, bald, crippled and missing one eye. Disgusted, André sneaks out as the Widow makes herself presentable. Having scared off his suitor, Millet prepares for his own wake. The play ends with Millet revealing himself to his fiancée and her family, letting them in on his new secret life.

Twain's reputation as the quintessential American author is in part validated by his exposure to the global stage. For the most part, this exposure was out of fiscal necessity; the incentives first as a travel writer and later as a lecturer were difficult to resist for the perennially money-troubled Twain. By January of 1898, the month that Twain began to write *Is He Dead?*, he had relocated his family to Vienna, Austria. In the year leading up to that moment, the Clemens family had been rocked by tragedy: their eldest daughter Susy had passed away. Twain also experienced several more personal losses: on top of his recent bankruptcy, his brother Orion had passed away in December, and Twain was experiencing one of his longest stretches of writer's block. By 1898, the alleviation of his debts seemed to lift this block, and Twain turned to an old friend of his: drama.¹⁸

As a young boy, Samuel Clemens was exposed to all brands of American theatre. Growing up in Hannibal, Missouri, Clemens witnessed the rise of the showboat: steamboats traveling along the rivers of the midwest, stopping at towns and plantations to perform theater for a waiting audience. He was also fortunate to see Dan Rice, the famous performer and impresario known for "perverting" the works of Shakespeare, and was well known to have loved the Minstrel Show, a form of theatre that would remain popular in America for over half a century.¹⁹ When Clemens took on the persona of Mark Twain, these early influences from theatre would find their

¹⁸ Mark Twain and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Is He Dead?: A Comedy in Three Acts* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), ix-x.

¹⁹ Thomas Schirer, *Mark Twain and the Theatre* (Nürnberg: H. Carl, 1984), 6.

way into the plots of his novels. When he attempted to contribute his own plays to the canon, audience and critical responses were mixed. By 1898, Twain had not personally produced a play in fourteen years.²⁰

Twain's diary records a flurry of activity surrounding *Is He Dead?* and his Viennese theatrical ventures. It appears he began work on the play in early January, and was nearly finished by February 6. Twain was so convinced that *Is He Dead?* would prove successful that on March 7 he sent a manuscript to his dramatic agent, the renowned Bram Stoker. Stoker, distracted by a recent fire that had gutted his theater, was unable to give *Is He Dead?* any serious consideration.²¹ This seemed to snuff out Twain's enthusiasm for dramatic writing and the play itself. Though he continued to work on other theatrical projects for the rest of his life, and distributed *Is He Dead?* to a handful of managers, Twain never saw his play on stage.²²

Throughout Twain's career as a writer, American theater was enjoying a popular new trend that, by the time Twain was writing *Is He Dead?*, had exploded into a phenomenon: the Frontier Drama. These were plays focused exclusively on the performance and commercialization of an image of the Frontier. The height of the

²⁰ Mark Twain and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Is He Dead?: A Comedy in Three Acts* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 151.

²¹ Mark Twain and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Is He Dead?: A Comedy in Three Acts* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), xi.

²² Thomas Schirer, *Mark Twain and the Theatre* (Nürnberg: H. Carl, 1984), 100.

movement coincided with the 1893 Columbian Exposition, where Frederick Jackson Turner first presented his Frontier Thesis.²³

There are a number of elements that tie together most of these frontier melodramas. First was a romantic plot line between a hardworking, rough-around-the-edges hero and a morally upright and educated heroine. Like in other melodramas, these two were pitted against a morally bankrupt villain.²⁴ Another important element to these dramas was the inclusion of potentially challenging views on racial and gender politics. As Hall notes, these seemed to be mostly included as publicity stunts: “While [frontier melodramas] raised social questions, they ultimately confirmed white, European models” (6). As these melodramas became more sophisticated, they began to focus on sentimentality while also tying the setting intrinsically to the plot “and suggested that the freedom of the western setting generated anomalous situations that were reasonable even though they violated accepted social conventions” (Hall, 6). An ethnically diverse cast is intrinsic to these frontier melodramas, though most characters were used once again as a tool to reinforce white European values. These foreigners were almost exclusively male, and the stereotypes they represented were varied: the hard-working, honest Chinese; the slow-witted, cowardly blacks; the drunken yet charming Irish; and the snobbish,

²³ Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 164.

²⁴ Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 5.

effete English; the (heroically) savage Indian and the deceitful, vile Mexican. These characters were mostly used as antagonists or comic relief to the white American hero and heroine at the core of the story.²⁵ As the genre continued to evolve, the social questions that were raised by these plays echoed current events in American history. The Spanish-American War became a popular plot device among the frontier melodramas of the late 1890s. These frontier dramas, though set amidst an American backdrop, began to address more and more issues on a global scale.²⁶

Is He Dead? is generally not considered part of the canon of frontier drama, at least not in the same way as *Ah Sin!*, Twain's first foray into playwriting. However, *Is He Dead?* is part of a broader phenomenon. The melodramatic qualities of Twain's work are easy to spot. Millet, the hero of the story, is a hard-working and well-meaning man, if a little rough around the edges thanks to his poverty as an artist. Even his debts at the beginning of the play are, according to Chicago, a testament to his good nature: "If he hadn't (borrowed money), we other young artists... would have starved, this year" (Twain, 10). Marie, Millet's fiancée, serves as the morally upright heroine, a foil for the villainous usurer André. Without a train track with which to tie the heroine to, André disregards the promises that he makes to not press Millet and Papa Leroux on their loans. During Millet's exhibition, in a moment of

²⁵ Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 7.

²⁶ Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001), 190.

typical mustache twirling villainy, André asides: “Ah yes, Monsieur Millet, you have your sweetheart—and next you’ll have hunger and a raging good appetite. Day after tomorrow I’ll drop on you: then there’ll have to be an auction—I’ll buy all these for a song— —and *burn* them—and you’re a ruined man” (34).

Twain’s writing style relies heavily on these classic character tropes. *Is He Dead?*’s supporting cast seems to have stepped right out of a classic frontier play. Millet’s students and friends include, but are not limited to: a hardworking Chinese student, a lady-killing Irishman, a haughty German, and a slightly effete Englishman, even an Indian, though subcontinental, not American. All of them are described by Twain to be dressed in “princely” clothes of their nationalities, but have been hit by the realities of life and the clothes are shabby and worn. Come their profound reversal of fortunes upon the “death” of Millet, they all reappear in the same clothes, “but new and splendid” (Twain, 24).

Turner’s frontier thesis decodes the presentation of the artists. Their impoverished condition bears strong resemblance to the first stages of Turner’s frontier wave: the artists have arrived as exemplars of their respective cultures and are worn down until they are all on the same economic level. Once they have paid their dues and fought off the darkness (though in *Is He Dead?*, the threat is not the Indian but crippling poverty), they have re-established their civilization. Their commonality is not only seen in their final presentation, but also in their shared struggle. The soldiers and settlers of Barker’s *Indian Princess* share a similar path; the lower-class

British and Irish settlers become rivals in wealth and status to those they once served in the old country. For these colonists, their struggle provides the impetus to create a shared American identity. Not so with Twain's artists. In essence, these frontiersmen remain culturally unique but individually bound together.

Leading this merry band is the only American of the play: Agamemnon "Chicago" Buckner. Chicago could be seen as a rival to Millet's role as hero: he is a clever, arrogant, irreverent, quick-thinking American who devises the many plans that keep pushing the plot forward. Chicago's gravitational force can be felt by everyone close to him:

MADAME AUDRIENNE: Come while it's hot—
everybody! (*filing toward the door*)

CHICAGO: That means me. (*Moving*)

CECILE: Of course—as far as the word goes. There's
hardly enough of it to describe you. (35)

Twain presents Chicago as a larger than life figure in a similar manner to Barker's John Smith. Unlike Smith, whose ego and stature is based on his heroic skill of arms, Chicago's is based on his wits. It is Chicago who organizes the initial auction of Millet's work and instructs his fellow artists in the proper prices they need to close at: "Get two hundred francs for the small minor pictures when you can—take less when you must—but *sell*"(24). It is also Chicago's idea to have Millet "die" to improve the price of his paintings, though this was in fact an improvement upon a suggestion given to him by Millet's German friend Hans Von Bismarck (referred to below as Duchy):

CHICAGO: It's this. No use for us *all* to die. One's enough. Let one of us die, to save the rest. (*Pause*) Dutchy said, 'When there's a great Master, the people don't *know* it—and they let him starve; and when he is dead and it is too late, his name fills the whole world, and the riches come.'" (*Pause*) One of us must seem to die—must change his name and disappear—we'll make his name sound through the world, and the riches will come. (46)

Chicago's "Americanness" connects him to the frontier enterprises on which Barker and Turner both rely. Like the Jamestown settlers or Turner's frontiersmen, Chicago finds himself selling products first for his own survival and later for greater and greater profit. The products that he sells are not the frontier crops or the traded furs, but the works of Millet: not just his paintings, but his very identity. In fact, for an artist, he does not seem to produce anything but capital through the play. This relationship is reminiscent of the Jamestown settlers' relationship with the Indians in *The Indian Princess*, trading their superior technology for processed goods.

Is He Dead? also contains an element of the self invention of the frontier in Millet's creation of his alter egos. These also are, in part, influenced by Chicago, or at least contrived by his fellow artists. First, as his own widowed sister, Millet's reinvention is one of necessity; to be able to hide in plain sight as he "dies" far off on the Barbary Coast. Later, once he has "died" and will be reintroduced as the painter Placide Duval, Millet's reinvention is to allow him access to his wealth without much further disguise. This reinvention has its costs, as Millet laments, "Ah. To live maybe fifty years, and suffer the daily torture of that bastard fame—successful imitator of

my own works!” (129). Fishkin notes that this lament comes at a time in Twain’s life where he himself is dealing with his own imitation and performance of self, and that it may serve as the author’s attempt to reconcile his feelings with his state of mind.²⁷ When seen in relation to Chicago’s effortless performance of American identity abroad, Twain’s hesitations may be the counter point to seeing “Americanness” as a performed identity abroad: the longer you perform, the harder it is to do anything else.

The frontier vortex presented in *Is He Dead?* is vastly different in its scope from the one present in *The Indian Princess*. It might even be argued that Twain’s France is not even a frontier at all, but when viewed within its historical context, a pattern begins to emerge. Twain places Chicago in Paris five years after the Census Bureau declared the American overland frontier “closed.” At the same time, the United States is beginning the Spanish-American War, its first war with a non-American power that wasn’t Great Britain. The result was the annexation of some of the United States’ first oversea territories: Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. These two events demonstrate a category crisis for the American frontier. No longer located in America proper, the frontier now travels with the American wherever he may go. Frontier melodrama and other American popular entertainments begin to take on global issues, repositioning Cuba and the Philippines as sites for

²⁷ Mark Twain and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Is He Dead?: A Comedy in Three Acts* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 202.

future American influence. *Is He Dead?* is a pioneer in that emerging tradition, reinscribing Europe as part of America's backyard. Though Twain wrote *Is He Dead?* with the intention of performance in 1898, it laid dormant until 2007, after it was rediscovered and mounted for the first time at the Lyceum Theater in New York. How then, does it form the behavior vortex needed to be seen in the same light as *The Indian Princess*? The performance of *Is He Dead?* in 2007, directed by Michael Blakemore, was adapted to the modern stage by David Ives. Ben Brantley's review from December 10, 2007, says: "From that moment [Millet's cross dressing] the whole production feels as if it's been pumped through with nitrous oxide. Jokes you would swear you would never laugh at suddenly seem funny."²⁸ *Is He Dead?* finds itself creating an unexpected vortex, creating connections with an audience born generations after Twain's death. The humor that Brantley finds in Millet's cross dressing, his flawed reinvention of self, shows these connections. Humor is one of the most timely elements of performance, and if Twain's humor can be translated across over a hundred years with relative ease, the behavioral vortex that Twain created is still somehow valid, still reaffirming behaviors that are socially acceptable. Within this vortex, there remains a question of originality, as Brantley does note: "[*Is He Dead?*] has a remarkably sprightly step...Most of the credit, I hasten to add, does not belong to the immortal author...but with the right doctors,

²⁸ Ben Brantley, "It's Not Life on the Mississippi, Jean-François Honey" Rev. of "*Is He Dead?*" *New York Times* (New York, NY), 10 Dec. 2007.

even a long-buried dinosaur can be made to dance.” However, Brantley does note an inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to discern which jokes are Twain’s and which are the result of Ives’ adaptation. In her introduction to the 2008 publication of Ives’ adaptation, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, the Stanford professor responsible for rediscovering Twain’s manuscript, comments: “Twain’s words are still there—as are his trademark satirical wit, his unforgettable characters, and his ingenious plot.”²⁹ If these elements are all still present and actionable by a talented director and comic actors, then the initial vortex Twain created is still present, but has gone through enough past performances that the slight updates from Ives allowed a fuller interaction with his audience. In her afterword for the 2003 publication of *Is He Dead?*, Fishkin presents the importance of looking at *Is He Dead?* within a modern context: elements that may have been seen as transgressive (such as Millet’s drag) or against the historical grain (such as a historically morose Twain writing a light hearted romp) are less important to its reception (201). This acceptance is a gateway to allow the re-inscription of Twain’s initial vortex. This performance then draws upon the out of place elements of Twain’s writing, but it also brings along the unexpected vortex of an early American Imperial frontier, with all the behaviors that come with it.

²⁹ Mark Twain and David Ives, *Is He Dead?* (New York: Playscripts, 2008), 8.

Part IV: *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*

In this age of interactive media and globalization, the creation of performative vortices has never been easier, particularly when considering video games. From the eye of a dramatic critic, video games are inherently theatrical. As a player, you are connected irrevocably to the forward dramatic motion of the game; you serve as both actor and audience. The characters within the game adhere to established guidelines determining their reactions, a script, if you will. The journey from beginning to end of a video game is usually longer than a play, but there is a path. With the video game as a theatrical medium, then it would stand to reason that video games are capable of embodying similar behavioral vortices. The 2013 video game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* offers another glimpse at the evolution of the American frontier vortex, which has slipped even its physical bonds and now finds itself embodied in the past, present, and future.

The action of *Assassin's Creed IV* consists of two interweaving plots, with advancement in one leading to advancing the other. The main action follows Edward Kenway, a fictional Welsh pirate operating during the closing years of the Golden Age of Piracy (1715-1725). Kenway left his wife to become a pirate in order to provide a better life for them in England. In 1715, when the ship he is serving on is attacked by a British convoy, Kenway is shipwrecked with a passenger from the British ship: a hooded soldier who murdered Kenway's captain. After Kenway avenges his captain's death, he finds the man was carrying a package of maps to Havana. Thinking he may

find a quick and easy payment from the man's employers, Kenway takes the clothes of the man and a mysterious letter he was carrying. After rescuing a merchant from a band of royal marines, Kenway, posing as the hooded assailant, is able to obtain passage to Havana.

At this point, the second plot begins. This plot places the gamer in the center of the action as a researcher for Abstergo Entertainment, a gaming subsidiary of the global Abstergo Enterprises. Abstergo Entertainment specializes in "virtual features:" video games that use actual memories accessed through an individual's DNA to create a entirely interactive experiences for the consumer. You are on the team compiling the memories from the "Sample 17" Project, memories provided by a "generous donation" from Desmond Miles. In your state-of-the-art cubicle, you are tasked with sifting through the life of Miles' ancestor, Edward Kenway, to prepare for Abstergo's first full length feature that focuses on pirates in the early 18th century. Once settled, you return to Kenway's life experience looking for, as your boss tells you, "The exciting bits."

What follows is a complex human story of adventure and betrayal mixed with piratical musings on the nature of politics and the human condition. Kenway's story takes him from the docks of Havana to the Ivory Coast. Along the way, he encounters a truly massive cast of diverse characters, both historical and fictionalized: Edward "Blackbeard" Thatch, Charles Vane, Mary Reed and Anne Bonny being just a few. The player's experience switches from Kenway's life to the hapless Abstergo

employee, who quickly finds themselves mired in a similar web of deception and espionage. The two stories parallel, and even at times share a cast and bleed through one another. Kenway first helps to govern the “Pirate Republic” of Nassau, before becoming embroiled in a centuries long conflict between the Assassins, who fight for self determination and free will, and the Templars, who seek to guide humanity into a controlled and ordered future.

The *Assassin's Creed* series is one of the flagship series of Ubisoft, a French founded multinational game production company. *Black Flag* is the seventh games in the series chronicling the struggle between Assassins and Templars. It began production in the summer of 2011, as was released three years later on October 23, 2013. It was produced by a multinational team of designers, artists, and researchers from Ubisoft's multiple cadet branches across the globe. American born Darby McDevitt was the lead writer for the script, who grounded his research with two historical works: 1724's *The General History of Pyrates*, and Colin Woodard's 2008 book, *The Republic of Pirates*.³⁰ Upon its release, *Black Flag* received overall positive reviews. Most reviews focus on the positives of the open-ended nature of the game: a carry over from earlier games in the series that has been improved upon in *Black Flag*. Many reviews focus on graphic improvements and advances in game play. Shaun McInnis of [gamespot.com](http://www.gamespot.com/articles/mantling-the-challenges-of-writing-assassins-creed-iv-black-flag/1100-6407241/) noted that the game's plot and pacing was

³⁰ Chris Watters, "Mantling the Challenges of Writing Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag," *GameSpot*, 18 Apr. 2013, Accessed: 13 Apr. 2014, <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/mantling-the-challenges-of-writing-assassins-creed-iv-black-flag/1100-6407241/>.

much faster than previous incarnations, throwing the player quickly into the life of a pirate.³¹ This is one of the few mentions of the dramatic structure of the game, with most reviews dismissing the alternate storyline as a mercifully short distraction at best and a waste of time at worse.

There is a very strong frontier attitude amongst the pirate rulers of Nassau. In a flashback, Kenway is confronted by his wife about his desire to become a privateer.

CAROLINE: You had a decent wage when you worked the farm, why can you not be satisfied with that? With me?

EDWARD: Decent wage? That job was near as damn it to robbery!

You want to be married to a peasant the whole of your life?³²

Kenway believes life in a savage land, free of an overseer, is preferable to steady work in England. Like Turner's immigrants, he is a lower-class individual, washing up on the shore of an untamed wilderness. He and his fellow frontiersmen, Thatch, Reed, and the pirates, are forced by their environment into their violent profession. Midway through the game, Thatch assaults Spanish ships and Charles-Towne, North Carolina. He reveals to Kenway these attacks are only driven by his need for health and safety: "I'm late into my fourth decade on this Earth, and if I don't find someday to make the fifth a quiet and cozy voyage, I'd rather sink to the Devil's doorstep than

³¹ Shaun McInnis, "Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag Review," *GameSpot*, 29 Oct. 2013, Accessed: 14 Apr. 2014, <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassin-s-creed-iv-black-flag-review/1900-6415509/>.

³² Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, Ubisoft, 2013, Xbox 360.

call myself captain another year.”³³ Kenway pursues his goals for a similar reason, with a promise to his wife to become “a man of property and promise.”³⁴ This drive for security and prosperity mirrors Turner’s frontier traders and farmers, in the same way as Smith and Chicago. The products Kenway and the pirates seek are the raw materials from the colonies: gold, silver, and other exports, but also the tools of civilization: canvas, rope, shot and gunpowder. In some ways, this sees a combination of the two methods of wealth acquisition found before in *Is He Dead?* and *The Indian Princess*. Chicago in *Is He Dead?* builds his frontier economy off the fine art of his friend: hawking paintings at exorbitant prices under false pretenses to those who can afford to pay. Though they do provide a service for in exchange for this money (unlike Kenway and the pirates), it is by no means a fair trade, at least for those who could have bought Millet’s paintings for a song before his untimely “death” and Chicago’s maneuvering. Barker’s frontier capital is derived from the wealth of others, namely the monstrous Indians on the other side of the frontier. This takes the form of both the traded furs, but also the underpopulated land that the settlers are now able to occupy.

The violence seen in Turner’s frontier is a commonplace occurrence in all pirate mythology, and *Black Flag* is no exception. The violence Kenway enacts is a side effect of this need for safety; he attacks merchants and military ships to secure

³³ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag*, Ubisoft, 2013, Xbox 360.

³⁴ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag*, Ubisoft, 2013, Xbox 360.

sugar and tobacco (which he sells to pay for to upgrade his ship), as well as iron, wood and cloth (which he uses to repair and refit his ship). The memory sequence “Raise the Black Flag,” where Kenway first comes across the Spanish navy, is described in the game as follows, “Edward learns the dangers and excitements of raising his wanted level and defending himself against the brigs that chase him down.”³⁵ Edward’s attacks first come out of necessity, but they quickly escalate to self defense against the navies of imperial Spain and England. This sort of defensive action is another manifestation of the defensive violence that Turner’s frontiersmen finds himself a part of. In *Black Flag*, the native hegemony has been replaced by a colonial one. In this way, the pirates find themselves taking his own equivalents of Indian scalps, though their Indian palisades are the ships they call their own. There are again parallels between the violence of the pirates and the violence found in *The Indian Princess*. Smith’s fight with Nantaquas and his braves is out of self defense, but also born of a love for adventure and excitement, again paralleling with Kenway’s thrill of the chase that is reinforced through the game.

The performance of nationalities in the world of *Black Flag* reveals a powerful undercurrent of frontier feeling. A majority of the characters that may be seen as protagonists present a vocal minority: Kenway is a Welsh laborer originating from the english working town of Bristol, itself the supposed birthplace of Edward Thatch. Mary Reed and Anne Bonny are women marginalized in English culture, and

³⁵ Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag*, Ubisoft, 2013, Xbox 360.

Bonny herself is Irish. Ah Tabai and Adéwalé, the leader of the Assassins and Kenway's quartermaster, respectively, are both men of color: Tabai a Mayan and Adé an escaped slave from Trinidad. Opposing them are a tyrannical Spanish governor, a French gun runner, an English pirate hunter, and a Dutch slave trader. Here then, we have a strong case for the frontier's hegemonizing force. These disparate minority elements have come together in the Caribbean to oppose the imperial presence of the European powers. In effect, they are pushing the development of the Caribbean away from European influences and towards this distinctly American melting pot. They are conducting themselves in similar ways to Barker's colonists and Twain's artists, taking the progress of their frontier civilization firmly in their own hands at the cost of the upper class/imperial controllers.

There is another frontier present surrounding this pirate frontier. This is the frontier the players themselves inhabit. With the near future technology of Abstergo Entertainment, the players immerse themselves amongst the memories of Edward Kenway stored upon the Animus "Cloud." This term "Cloud" connects *Black Flag* with terminology used in the modern world wide web. Though presumably not connected up to the actual internet, Abstergo's cloud is a clear stand in for the "real" internet, a digital frontier. The player has, in the same way as past frontiersmen, approached this frontier with a mind for profit; mining for information and memories that will be used for financial gain. Even by the end of his storyline, an Assassin ensures that, if the player provides them with information, they "can make it worth

your while,” indicating that the struggles Kenway has between piracy and devotion to the Assassins do not trouble the player; the modern frontier is one solely interested in capital. This may indicate, in Turner’s methodology, an age for this frontier: still too young to develop a civilizing and/or moralizing presence.

As with the twofold frontier, *Black Flag* contains multiple vortices of behavior, each dependent on the level of involvement from the participant. On the most tangible level, the video game itself presents a vortex of behavior. This may seem paradoxical given that, for the most part, the player is alone when he or she interfaces with the game. But in today’s age of internet connective game systems, there is a sizable online community surrounding *Black Flag*: individuals around the world contributing to walkthroughs, hunts for “easter eggs” (in game bonus material), and conversations about the game and the game series in general. In addition, Ubisoft itself has included its own entrance points into this virtual vortex: an immersive multiplayer environment that takes place within the same environments that the game does, as well as a online “community challenges,” which compile the actions and achievements of everyone playing *Black Flag* towards a single goal, be it sinking 10,000 ships or seizing one million Spanish reales. With these challenges and online communities, a behavioral vortex is formed. Individuals separated by thousands of miles all simultaneously ascribe to and perform a set of standardized behaviors for whatever the common good might be.

While players immerse themselves in this community vortex, they inadvertently buy into the vortices that the game itself creates. The vortex of behavior that is Kenway's Caribbean is vast. Like the vortex that it embodies (the historical time and place), this sea is a meeting place for the cultures of Spain, England, and America. European and native customs and behaviors are forced up against one another, forming and reforming, being performed and re-performed. Kenway's goal of wealth is to help establish him as "a pirate king," a performance that comes out of the behaviors of Europe but is antithetical to the republican system of government that the pirates, frontier inhabitants within this vortex, have tried to establish. Here then, we see the conflicts that would flare into the American Revolution, played out via displaced transmission in a microcosm of Euro-American cultural politics. The freedom and democratic ideals upheld by the Nassau republic and the Assassins are under assault by the imperial ideals of duty and service to a higher power, performed and reinforced by the European Templars.

Another vortex of counter-memories is taking place within this world. In the Abstergo story line, you are told by your boss that your work will yield very positive results once "the boring bits" are filtered out. The initial trailers that are created for "Devils of the Caribbean," the virtual feature that is built from Kenway's memories, do almost exactly that: they re-inscribe the memories that you have witnessed with a sense of bloodthirsty debauchery that is hardly present within them. In essence, the Abstergo behavioral vortex is one of counter-memories: taking the behaviors and

actions that actually happened and molding them to a new narrative. This redefines the acts of violence that help Kenway and the pirates survive and prosper as wanton acts of senseless bloodshed fueled by alcohol and a sense of lawlessness.

With this foreshadowing, the American frontier (or frontiers) experienced in *Black Flag* demonstrate another shift in the vortex that it has created. From the combined experience of the game's multiple plots, the frontier has shed any semblance of physical location. The American frontier attitudes that Twain and others at the turn of the century tracked onto the rest of the world have taken root to the point that in 2013, a French based company can create a video game that bleeds the frontier. The worlds that the players of *Black Flag* inhabit are performed frontier spaces. Both are in some way virtual, but they stretch in opposite directions. The story of Edward Kenway shows frontier attitudes fitting well within the constraints of 17th century pirates; pirates who by no means called themselves Americans, but now embody those same attitudes. The story of Abstergo Entertainment throws similar frontier attitudes into both the near future and the internet. The American frontier is expanding to include not just the physical world, but also its past and future.

Conclusion: The Final Frontier...

Since its close in 1893, the American frontier has continued to find itself in the spotlight. Stories of such mythic frontier figures like John Smith, Lewis and Clark, and Davey Crockett have captured the public imagination over the century. Over the years, these real life individuals have found themselves alongside fictional figures: Hawkeye and Chingachgook of *The Last of the Mohicans* and Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, to name a few. These men (as the frontier hero almost always is) embody the same spirit that Turner attempted to qualify in his *Frontier Thesis*: the thrill of wilderness freedom, a drive for personal wealth, and the necessity to defend oneself against anyone who would encroach upon said wealth or freedom. This spirit is equally embodied by the frontiersmen of *The Indian Princess* as it is by the schemers of *Is He Dead* and the pirates, both maritime and digital, of *Black Flag*.

As America looked out to the stars, a new frontier became home to a new wave of frontier hero. The crew (or crews) of Gene Roddenberry's *U.S.S. Enterprise* (NCC-1701 and its descendants, 1701-D and NX-01) were multi-ethnic and consisted of strong women as well as men; a significant deviation, though still covered by Turner's thesis. In all cases, they boldly braved the unknown, defending themselves when necessary, but always upheld their own moral codes and brought the peaceful mission of their Federation to those outside its light. For the *Enterprise*, their frontier was never-ending, unlike the clear and definite borders set out for their Earthbound

predecessors. Roddenberry's vision of the frontier's future was a positive one; the American frontier spirit being harnessed for good, the thirst for adventure being used to advance all of humanity, and therefore the galaxy. It is not unlike Barker's attempt at molding the frontier spirit in *The Indian Princess*, reusing the older colonial frontier mythos to build a communal sense of identity that could be pushed into the continent for the betterment of the United States, or Twain's crafty and inventive Chicago creating a universal American identity through a shared struggle. In the 21st century, this futuristic frontier has evolved into the cyber frontier that we live and work on every day. Manifesting itself in places like the *Assassin's Creed* series, the digital frontier is as infinite as space itself, but accessible and performed by everyone, not just the select crew of a starship.

For all the optimism found in performances of the frontier, there are numerous instances when this performance infringes upon the freedoms and adventures of others. The same frontier identity that Barker fosters would very soon be turned against the natives, reinvented as the "monstrous other" for the purposes of unification. The dehumanization of the peoples found on the other side of the frontier leads, inexorably to events like the Battle of Little Big Horn and The Trail of Tears, where men, women and children on both sides of the frontier suffer from their exposure to each other.

Those Indian scalps that Turner's settler finds himself taking have even found their way into today's performance of American identity. The many "Stand Your

Ground Laws” present in this country effectively allow individuals to create a frontier space encompassing themselves and those that would “do them harm.” This allows otherwise horrific acts to be understood or reinterpreted as “defending themselves and their own.” After all, Americans have grown up to understand that the frontier is a dangerous place, equally full of wealth and those that would steal that wealth. Anyone who owns a gun or ascribes to the ideal of the self-made man still carries the frontier spirit inside of them. The frontiers that crop up every day in this country are no less real as the frontiers of John Smith, Chicago, or Edward Kenway. They each inform how Americans, and those who would perform an American identity, see themselves.

The theatrical artifacts explored in this paper illustrate that this frontier mythology plays out in our lives in ways of which we are hardly aware. There may not be performances of *The Indian Princess* any more, but the frontier-infused work of Mark Twain still resonates with audiences. We have become so enamored of this mythology that it bleeds into our popular entertainment, our video games and television, as well as our laws. The justice that laws should enforce is sometimes infringed upon by the freedoms that this mythology affords. The insights that can be drawn from these theatrical products help to understand this discrepancy, and perhaps to begin to correct it.

Bibliography

Barker, James N. *The Indian Princess, or, La Belle Sauvage*. Philadelphia: T & G Palmer, 1808, in *Representative Plays By American Dramatists*. Vol. 1. Moses, Montrose J, Ed. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964.

Brantley, Ben. "It's Not Life on the Mississippi, Jean-François Honey." Rev. of *"Is He Dead?"* *New York Times* (New York, NY), 10 Dec. 2007.

Crowley, John W. "James Nelson Barker in Perspective." *Educational Theatre Journal* 24, No. 4 (Dec. 1972): 363-369.

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.

Hall, Roger A. *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Hitchcock, H. Wiley. "An Early American Melodrama: The Indian Princess of J.N. Barker and John Bray. *Notes*, Second Series 12, No. 3 (Jun. 1955): 375-388.

McInnis, Shaun. "Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag Review." *GameSpot*. 29 Oct. 2013. Accessed: 14 Apr. 2014, <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassin-s-creed-iv-black-flag-review/1900-6415509/>.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *History of the American Drama, from the Beginning to the Civil War*. New York: Appelton-Century-Crofts, 1923.

Roach, Joseph R. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

Schirer, Thomas. *Mark Twain and the Theatre*. Nürnberg: H. Carl, 1984.

Turner, Frederick J. *The Frontier in American History*. Tuscon: University of Arizona, 1986.

Twain, Mark, and David Ives. *Is He Dead?* New York: Playscripts, 2008.

Twain, Mark, and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. *Is He Dead?: A Comedy in Three Acts*. Berkeley: University of California, 2003.

Ubisoft Montreal. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Ubisoft, 2013. Xbox 360.

Watters, Chris. "Mantling the Challenges of Writing Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag." *GameSpot*. 18 Apr. 2013. Accessed: 13 Apr. 2014, <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/mantling-the-challenges-of-writing-assassins-creed-iv-black-flag/1100-6407241/>.