

What If the Pen Was Mightier Than the Sword? Civil War Alternate History as Social Criticism

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Abstract: Alternate histories about the American Civil War seem ideally set up to explore the possibilities and tensions of social criticism through art and literature. Counterfactual stories about the war easily invoke contemporary issues of inequality and exploitation, and they are part of a genre—alternate history—that has traditionally lent itself to social commentary. Yet while scholarship on alternate history has captured the presentist orientation of many alternate histories in the fantasy-nightmare dichotomy, these categories appear reductive as a reflection of the layered and intriguing forms social criticism takes in Civil War alternate history. This article examines two examples of this genre that position themselves as political statements. Frank Purdy Williams’s largely forgotten novel *Hallie Marshall: A True Daughter of the South* (1900) subverts major literary traditions of its time to mount a counterintuitive critique of capitalist exploitation. Kevin Willmott’s mockumentary *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (2004) is both a scathing critique of American racism and a multilayered satire on the distortion of history in popular culture. Both works use the conventions of alternate history as conduits for critique and provocation, which makes the revelation of their ideological investments ingenious but perhaps dangerously circuitous.

In 1900 New York, a small press published a now obscure novel called *Hallie Marshall: A True Daughter of the South*. The novel is a peculiar fantasy, the premise of which borrows from Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889): An industrious manufacturer from New England wakes up from a nap to find himself inexplicably transported to an idyllic alternative South—called the ‘Southland’—that won its independence in 1865 and remained a society based on slavery. The main

character, a typical free-labor Yankee, meets Hallie Marshall, the personification of Southern hospitality and feminine grace, with whom he falls in love. He also becomes acquainted with her father, a gentleman planter and passionate proponent of the Southland's society based on interdependence and benign paternalism. The Yankee's hosts introduce him to their society with the explicit goal of converting him to their philosophy of life and labor in order to erode his loyalty to the North. When they succeed, he is faced with the choice of staying in 'paradise' or returning to preach the gospel of the Southland in the Northern states.

Hallie Marshall was written by Frank Purdy Williams, a man whom history has largely forgotten. Nevertheless, *Hallie Marshall* is worth rescuing from obscurity for several reasons. First, it is an early example of an alternate history (AH), a story that changes a historical fact or event to imagine how history could have been different.¹ Although the first scattered AH texts date back to the 1830s, they were not recognized as constituting a subgenre of historical writing or science fiction until the middle of the twentieth century. Second, *Hallie Marshall* is the inaugural work in a fascinating cultural tradition: Civil War alternate history (CWAH), a form that imagines alternative outcomes to the defining rift in American history. Since the dawn of the twentieth century, nearly 150 considerations of an alternative Civil War have appeared in a range of forms, moods, and contexts.² Third, and finally, *Hallie Marshall* intrigues in its own right, since it not only is an AH *avant la lettre* and the first in its subject category but also belongs to the distinct and somewhat rare tradition of AH as social criticism.

In this article, I explore how AH is used as a form of social criticism. I first give a short overview of the forms and functions of AH and reflect on AH used as social commentary. On the basis of this theoretical background, I analyze two examples of alternate histories within the CWAH canon to show the self-aware and ingenious ways in which they use a hypothetical past to criticize the present. Finally, I venture some thoughts on the effectiveness of AH as social criticism.

1 For more on the definition of AH, cf. Hellekson, particularly chapter one.

2 I define a CWAH as a text or cultural document that entertains a counterfactual question related to the Civil War, usually as a way of reflecting on the significance of the war to American and world history. This definition deliberately transcends the common association of AH as a historiographical tool or as a subgenre of science fiction. It, therefore, includes the handful of CWAHs written before alternate history became a genre along with science fiction in the 1950s. In addition, this definition is purposely democratic; it sees the conjectures of scholars, politicians, journalists, novelists, genre writers, editors, humorists, game creators, and others as expressions of the same kind of preoccupation with the Civil War's importance to American history and society as well as with a universal attraction to the question 'what if?'

1. FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF ALTERNATE HISTORY

Alternate history is a strange and somewhat arbitrary form. As a genre, principle, form, or mode, it goes by the terms alternate, alternative, virtual, speculative, or counterfactual history, uchronia, and allohistory, each of which has different connotations.³ Counterfactuality as a transdisciplinary phenomenon has received attention from scholars in many fields, including its main domains historiography and literary studies but also psychology, linguistics, and cognitive science.⁴ Scholars have used theories of AH to discuss the possibility of historical truth and the validity of ideas about determinism, cause and effect, individual agency, chaos and contingency in the course of history.⁵ AH has been cast as a celebration of postmodern ideas about the multiplicity and narrativity of historical consciousness, and it has been linked to the idea of ‘the end of history.’⁶ Conversely, it has also informed arguments against postmodern ideas about historical relativism and the perceived ideological determinism of critical theory.⁷ The preoccupation with the nature of time and history is the characteristic that most broadly describes allohistorical writing, as it encompasses all expressions of AH from counterfactual histories (cf. Ferguson) to fantastical stories about time travel. Most scholarship on AH is, in turn, concerned with theorizing alternate history’s relationship to history, fiction, and genre writing, and its implications for concepts of contingency, determinism, causality, and historiography.

3 While the following terms are sometimes applied indiscriminately, as a rule, ‘counterfactual,’ ‘virtual,’ and ‘speculative’ are used for those what-ifs entertained by historians. ‘Allohistory’ (literally ‘other history’) is sometimes used as a catch-all term; ‘uchronia’ is associated with fantasy. The terms ‘alternative’ and ‘alternate’ are often used for those forms of counterfactuality closest to literature, including the ones I discuss in this article. I use the term ‘alternate’ rather than ‘alternative’ to emphasize that alternate history functions in constant reference to historical reality, which makes their relationship reciprocal rather than exclusive.

4 For an overview of recent approaches to counterfactual thinking from many different disciplines, though with an emphasis on historiography and literary studies, cf. Birke et al.

5 Niall Ferguson’s introduction to the 1999 defense of counterfactual historiography *Virtual History* seeks to claim a sanitized version of counterfactual history as a historiographical tool. When it comes to this interest in counterfactual thinking, historiography is in some sense hindered by its long antagonism toward counterfactuality, which coats many considerations of counterfactual history in a defensive wariness. Some scholars have argued for counterfactuals as methodological tools to add to our understanding of historical facts. They justify these thought experiments for the insight they can give us into what did happen. Others have validated speculation as inherent to historiography by demonstrating how historians already rely on implied hypotheticals to ascribe importance to events or episodes. Cf., e.g., Bulhof; Waldenegg.

6 Cf. seminal works by Karen Hellekson and Gavriel Rosenfeld (*World*) for scholars who have predicated their theories of AH on postmodern and post-structuralist ideas about fiction and history, often based in Hayden White’s notion of ‘metahistory.’ Rosenfeld connects the post-1989 prevalence of AH to ‘the end of history’ (*World* 6).

7 Cf. Roman Katsman’s polemical but illuminating theory of AH, which takes aim at the scholars mentioned above.

While it has taken many shapes over its history, the earliest manifestations of AH were works of literature engaged in social commentary (Hellekson 18).⁸ Even if that early function has not proven dominant in the evolution of AH, it has remained an underlying function of AHs to use the past to reflect on the present by falling into one of two categories: fantasies, which critique the present by contrasting it with an ideal or preferable alternative, or nightmares, which express contentment with our reality because, as the title of one AH suggests, “we could do worse” (Benford; cf. Rosenfeld, “Why”). The CWAH canon offers some good examples of this dyad: Ernest Crosby’s article “If the South Had Been Allowed to Go” (1903) is a fantasy of avoided bloodshed and also an indictment of American imperialism, written by a New York progressive reformer who lamented the Civil War as the first US imperial war. The journalist and humorist H. L. Mencken wrote “The Calamity of Appomattox” (1930), a fantasy that speculates that aristocratic values of the Old South could have saved the United States from political and corporate corruption.

Whereas the fantasy-nightmare dyad is widely accepted as an abiding characteristic of AH that lends itself to reflections on its own time, not much has been written about the implication of this dyad for alternate history’s potential for social commentary—with the notable exception of the work of Gavriel Rosenfeld. My work on CWAH bears some affinity with that of Rosenfeld, as he is probably the strongest advocate for the position that the speculations of AHs reflect something about their time.⁹ I depart from Rosenfeld because his presentist approach—which links the political undertones of a text to its readers’ response in order to measure how its narrative resonates in its own time—underappreciates literary merit and the agency of writer and reader and, most importantly, fails to get at what makes CWAH truly intriguing. Many CWAHs are self-aware, multilayered, contrary, and irreverent to a degree that to treat them primarily as containers of subliminal narrative is to miss the diffuse forms they take to state their case.

Even though alternate historians question past events, it is essential to note that the CWAH canon is not brimming with obvious social criticism. Dissatisfaction with the past does not necessarily translate into articulated grievances with the resulting present, and this distinction is another check on an overly presentist interpretation of alternate history. Any writer may be politically engaged without their knowledge, but it

8 The first full-length AH novel was Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château’s *Napoléon et la conquête du monde, 1812-1823: Histoire de la monarchie universelle* (1836), which imagined an alternative global order if Napoleon had never been defeated.

9 Rosenfeld is also the only scholar of AH whose work focuses on the sociopolitical meaning of AH on a specific historical event or period, in his case alternative outcomes of World War II (*World*).

is not my objective in this article to study the unconscious ideological investments of CWAHs. Instead, I look at CWAHs that unmistakably position themselves as social criticism and, by extension, at writers who intentionally chose AH as a vehicle for their act of literary activism. To illuminate their choice, I show how the characteristics and conventions of AH are used as conduits for critique and provocation.

2. ALTERNATE HISTORY AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Alternate history lends itself to two literary traditions often used for social commentary: the dystopian or utopian novel and the satire. Utopias and dystopias are the starkest form of the fantasy-nightmare dichotomy, which puts many AHs in the company of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and other works of political dystopian fiction. This affiliation shows the kinship between AH and science fiction: Whether the dystopia or utopia is located in a future or alternative timeline, both genres create nonexistent worlds that loom over the reader because are understood to be possible versions of their own world.¹⁰

Utopias have a long history as satire because their exaggerated superiority invites scorn or ridicule for contemporary society (Abrams and Harpham 378). To this tradition, AH adds a strong propensity for irony, which stems from its inherent intertextuality. According to Kathleen Singles, "alternate history only 'works' if the reader is able to contrast it to his or her knowledge of the narrative of history" (8). This tension between AH and historical reality constitutes a central point of interest in alternate history (Hellekson 28). The constant dialogue between perceived historical reality and alternate history means the genre easily creates structural irony. Its intertextuality is "a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning and evaluation throughout the work" (Abrams and Harpham 166), which results in a structural characteristic of CWAHs that invites ironic or satirical renegotiations of social organization.

In the following section, I contrast the negotiations of social criticism in two exemplary texts. As an example of traditional social criticism, Harriet Beecher

10 It has been argued that all futuristic fiction eventually becomes AH once the time of its setting has passed in reality, as at that point the world it imagines becomes an alternative past of sorts (cf., e.g., Medinger). I question this argument because it makes genre categorizations of fiction dependent on the passage of time instead of the text's own characteristics. AH should be defined as such because it is written with the intention to change the past in their fiction, not imagine a future.

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1855) makes its point through direct appeals and tropes of sentimentalism. In contrast, the AH *Fire on the Mountain* by Terry Bisson (1988) subtly invokes social criticism through ironic implication. These two different approaches to social criticism will serve as a foundation for my analysis of the CWAHs *Hallie Marshall* and *C.S.A.*

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* famously depicts slavery as an inherently cruel system antithetical to family bonds and human compassion by using tropes of sentimentalism as tools of persuasion. The novel invites readers to feel sympathy for its characters and often addresses the reader in direct emotional appeals. During the nineteenth century, the sentimental was associated with the feminine. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most potent expressions of its strategy of persuasion come from or on behalf of female characters, as in Eliza's escape from slavery in order to prevent her young son from being sold and in a senator's wife's plea to her husband to shelter the refugees in defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850). Stowe and her protagonists directly and indirectly ask the (female) reader 'what would you do?' to depict acts then considered criminal—escape from slavery and attempts to harbor escaped slaves—as natural and right (Bertens and D'haen 88). The success of Stowe's novel contributed significantly to public anti-slavery sentiment, which has resulted in the idea that Abraham Lincoln, upon meeting Stowe in 1862, referred to her as “the little woman who made this great war” (Gordon-Reed). The anecdote is unproven yet pervasive because it is so illustrative that no account of Stowe's influence is complete without it.

Terry Bisson's novel *Fire on the Mountain* represents a different approach to social criticism. The novel imagines how John Brown and Harriet Tubman might have succeeded in their raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 and unleashed a slave revolt across the South. After a war for independence, the South becomes Nova Africa, a black socialist republic that develops into an unabashed utopia and spearheads the global socialist revolution. *Fire on the Mountain* is presented as a work of radical political fiction: It is dedicated to “the Black Liberation Army past, present and future” (Bisson 8), and Bisson himself is described as “a 1960's New Left vet with a history of activism and an intact (if battered) radical ideology” (138). New editions include a foreword by the incarcerated black activist Mumia Abu-Jamal, which explicitly places *Fire on the Mountain* in the tradition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* literary activism: “Stowe's work forced millions to think about something they didn't want to ponder—American slavery. It is in this fecund spirit that Bisson's *Fire* rages in the dark night of Black American life” (10). Yet despite its posturing, Bisson's alternate history does not show its radicalism directly. The novel's primary setting is a peaceful and enviable present, while its depictions of conflict and suffering are narrated through family

histories and documents that locate the turmoil and violence of global revolution safely in the past.

Fire on the Mountain's most penetrating moment of critique is accomplished through a structural feature unique to AH: A text or narrator within the story narrates our history as if ours is the (un)desirable alternative, which draws attention to the text's nature as either fantasy or nightmare. In the case of *Fire on the Mountain*, the fictional book *John Brown's Body* is a dystopian AH within a utopia that describes actual history, including John Brown's failure and execution, the Civil War as a conflict between white factions, and the global triumph of capitalism. The characters in *Fire on the Mountain* describe this book as wishful thinking for old white people that are still bitter about the existence of Nova Africa, and some dismiss it as science fiction. Others, however, grant it some merit. One character says "[i]t's a white nationalist fantasy, and somewhat overdone. But you must admit, *John Brown's Body* gives food for thought" (128). For this character, the most intriguing thing is "a certain grim honesty" (129) in the ending of the book, in which Americans take over the world and become gluttonous and cannibalistic in their insatiability. Mock-histories within AHs can serve to call attention to a "key question" (Hellekson 30) of the text, just as *John Brown's Body* does for *Fire on the Mountain*. Given the activist credentials of *Fire on the Mountain* and its author, the ominous course of capitalism and imperialism—buried several layers deep in a book within a book, mentioned in passing and swiftly dismissed by its clueless characters—is the starkest message of warning in a book that otherwise envelops its readers in the fantasy of a black utopia.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was an unabashedly political act that shows the power of a clear moral stance and direct emotional appeals. By contrast, *Fire on the Mountain* is emblematic of AH's indirect and sometimes oblique approach to social commentary. Taken together, these novels invoke a longstanding concern for writers who wish their work to have real sociopolitical impact, namely the balance between politics and art and the suspicion that these ends often work at cross-purposes. The potential paradox of politically engaged literature is that, as Peter Leman notes, "the more one employs fiction in a political cause, the less it is able to manifest those exceptional qualities (of representing the truth as one sees it, of exploring and containing ambiguity, of imagining the range of human experience and perception) that led to its being yoked to the political in the first place" (1283). The tension in political writing that Leman describes here is relevant because AH is inherently intricate and indirect. If the central concern of literary activism is the amount of complexity or ambiguity authors can afford before they muddle their message, these stories offer an intriguing test case. Regardless of the degree of political engagement in AH, one constant is that its

political power is allusive: By showing what could be, it implies judgment on what is. As such, even those writers who choose to give their work a clear political subtext convey it in roundabout ways.

CWAH texts offer a chance to explore the tensions of writing as a political act. Their social relevance is obvious and even intrusive: Discourse on the Civil War has always had to deal with contemporary issues of racial inequality and labor exploitation. As both Civil War fiction and alternate history, CWAHs have used the easy evocation of these political issues in combination with a form that enables stylistic modes of critique to produce impressive works of social criticism. Having both outlined the theoretical framework of AH and provided examples of traditional and ‘alternate’ social criticism, I will now discuss two examples of CWAH that clearly frame or position themselves as political statements.

3. WILLIAMS’S NOVEL *HALLIE MARSHALL*

Frank Purdy Williams provided the obscure start to CWAH as a cultural tradition and also wrote what is still one of the strangest and most intriguing Civil War alternate histories. Yet he did not intend to do either. His writing instead flowed from a devotion to the progressive reform he worked on in association with the noted economist Henry George (Williams, Biographical Note 3). George’s ideas fell somewhere between capitalism and socialism. He believed people were entitled to the fruits of their own labor, but he was also convinced that land and its natural resources should belong to society as a whole. This philosophy, known as Georgism or Single Tax—because it proposed making land public and collecting rent on it to be invested in the common good—was a reaction against the social inequality of the latter half of the nineteenth century (Montgomery). Although Williams is not remembered for his own work as a reformer, he was a devoted follower of his employer. Before trying his hand at literature, he self-published a fiery defense of George’s Single Tax, in which he described George as “that man of whose achievement emancipated labor will sing in everlasting anthem” (Williams, *Discovery* 2). In *Hallie Marshall*, he expressed his convictions and frustrations in a socioeconomic critique that was counterintuitive yet timely and that remains intriguing over a century later.

Hallie Marshall borrows from major literary traditions of its time. It is first and foremost an ironic version of a social protest novel in the vein of Edward Bellamy’s fictional work *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), which likewise follows a young man who wakes up in an alternative utopian America and becomes convinced of its

socioeconomic philosophy. While in Bellamy's bestseller the setting is a utopian future, *Hallie Marshall* creates an alternate reality in which a fantasy version of a preindustrial antebellum South has been allowed to continue undisturbed beyond 1865. The Southland is a fantasy golden mean of everything. It is ruled by individualism and small government but still able to guarantee a comfortable existence to all of its inhabitants. It is a self-sufficient welfare state that is both socially progressive and frozen in agrarian feudalism. Similar to Bellamy, Williams is reluctant to align his utopia with socialism or Marxism: It is explained that the natural basis of trade in the South makes organized labor unnecessary. Additionally, traditional gender roles are preserved in the Southland's society, education is provided to each child by the state, there is no commodity consumer culture, and streetcars, described as "ungainly things" (Williams, *Hallie* 147), are run underground at public expense. Nevertheless, taxes are low and government interference is minimal. If these things sound vague or unrealistic, it is because the novel's characters usually do not offer specifics in their descriptions and observations but only general principles and their supposed effects.

The Southland offers a contrast to the Gilded Age industrial North that Williams and his readers lived in, for which the author borrowed from an unlikely source: The labor system in the Southland speaks to a tradition of ideas about labor propagated by antebellum proslavery writers, most notably George Fitzhugh, who attacked the European and Northern celebration of free-labor capitalism as more exploitative than the reliance on slavery in the South. Fitzhugh contended that capitalism recreates the master-slave dichotomy in the relation between the professional class and their free laborers but without the "humane code of southern paternalism," which allegedly left Northern workers more disenfranchised than black slaves (Kirkpatrick). It is this tradition of slavery apologists that *Hallie Marshall* borrows from when it makes the provocative suggestion of a South that was saved by the mobilization of its slave population because the slaves saw through the North's free-labor ideology. Hallie's father, the Southern planter, recounts:

We showed the slaves that the freedom that 'Marsa Linkum' wanted to give them was a condition that would set them free to work or starve, as they could or could not find employment; and would set their masters free from all responsibility as regarded the negroes—children, aged, helpless and all. We showed our slaves that the North was waging war for the purpose of subjugating the South and of throwing the negroes into a condition which, under the name of liberty, would fail to guarantee to them that which alone makes freedom real—the means of independence. The blacks chose slavery in preference to that sort of freedom. (Williams, *Hallie* 96)

While on the surface, this passage suggests a familiar apologist depiction of slavery, in fact, *Hallie Marshall* uses the theme of slavery not to negate the evils of the system but as a vehicle to criticize contemporary labor conditions. Hallie Marshall and her father pride themselves on the idea that the Southland guarantees all of its inhabitants—citizens and ‘property’—the right to subsistence as opposed to independence. In the Southland, slaves are paid a gratuity of the plantation’s profits, elect their own overseers, and are allowed to accumulate money. Hallie claims that Southerners have learned real love for their dependents; they plant fruit trees to shade their slaves working in the field. Additionally, slaves and masters dance together to “Dixie” at the plantation’s Gathering House. Both Hallie and her father assert that slavery is no longer “the cruel non-elastic system of the days before the war.” It is a modified institution, resembling “a system of tutelage” (44) in which “[t]he rights of the negroes are protected; their right to life, that great natural right of mankind. Sick or well, young or old, every slave is sure of subsistence” (101). Consequently, there is no poverty and misery as it exists in the industrial North. “Here in the South,” the older Marshall argues, “our social conditions are natural conditions; on our plantations and in our cities our laboring classes are well fed and prosperous” (115). He rejects the Yankee’s liberal insistence that wealth inequality is inevitable and asks him who the real dependents are: “The slaves of the South [...] have to do with kind and considerate masters; the slaves of the North have to do with unfeeling, iron conditions. Which slavery is the worst?” (103). Similar to Fitzhugh and other proslavery commentators, the Southerners in *Hallie Marshall* treat slavery as primarily an issue of class and labor relations.

In addition to Bellamy and Fitzhugh, *Hallie Marshall* was influenced by two related literary trends—antebellum and postbellum—that depicted the Old South for Northern readers. *Hallie Marshall*’s romantic portrait of the South as an idyllic reprieve from the pressures of change and decline recall the Gilded Age nostalgia for an idealized antebellum South that was common in plantation novels of the time. These works used the traditional marriage plot to express the national trend toward sectional reunion through the marriage between a Yankee man and a Southern Belle (Blight 217). In addition to these Reconstruction romances, *Hallie Marshall* has a lot in common with Caroline Hentz’s *The Planter’s Northern Bride* (1854), in which the daughter of a Northern abolitionist marries a Southern planter and comes to prefer the supposedly humane and natural values of slavery over the restless pursuit of profit. *The Planter’s Northern Bride* was an ‘anti-Tom novel,’ a type of novel written during the 1850s to protest Stowe’s depictions of slavery in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Like these predecessors, *Hallie Marshall* revolves around the romance between a Northerner and

a Southerner, which symbolizes sectional reconciliation and occasions the Northerner's gradual understanding and affection for the Southern way of life.

Yet the romance between Hallie and her Yankee beau is more than an unrealistic depiction of the Old South or a problematic commentary on race and reunion: There is something dangerous about Hallie's influence over him that makes their love story a corrupted romance between North and South. The Yankee's political conversion and love for Hallie develop in tandem throughout the novel. It is her influence over him that accelerates the former. She is described as the woman of his dreams, a vision, and an ethereal presence that has a befuddling effect on him: "Hallie's witchery was working upon me; already I had begun to feel that delicious sense of restraint which daily grew stronger and stronger" (Williams, *Hallie* 21). The Yankee is aware of her influence and attempts to resist it: "I knew that slavery was slavery, even if Hallie's matchless eyes did glow when she called it a condition of tutelage" (44). Before long, however, his initial resistance melts away. When the planter makes his rational case against the Yankee's Northern convictions, Hallie actually impedes his mental faculties: "Hallie was in my thoughts so deeply that I was finding it very difficult to think about the condition of the poor. What I was thinking was that it would be bliss to be wherever Hallie was—slavery or no slavery" (103-04). Not only is the North-South romance in *Hallie Marshall* coercive, it is also, most importantly, a frustrated marriage plot: Their marriage is prevented by the Yankee's return to reality in the novel's coda.

The coercive and confusing effect of Hallie's influence alludes to another literary tradition that the novel self-consciously corrupts: the appeals to feminine emotions associated with the sentimental tradition and harnessed, as discussed, by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a tool of political persuasion. The most important reference to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *Hallie Marshall* is the arrival of a new Yankee in the Southland. When a destitute Northern laborer and his starving child appear on the family's doorstep, Hallie's father sanctimoniously welcomes them into his home in the name of Southern hospitality. The scene mirrors the previously mentioned key scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which the wife of Senator Bird pleads with him to shelter and aid the Southern refugee Eliza and her child in spite of the Fugitive Slave Act. In *Hallie Marshall*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* theme of feminine empathy and persuasion is evoked when the Northerner's child dies. In a saccharine scene that is key to the Yankee's conversion, Hallie wraps the dead child in the Confederate flag:

Gently—oh, how gently—we wrapped the flag around the quiet little form—Hallie speaking to the unconscious ears in a voice that was as soft and low as the summer wind of her own Southland: "The Stars and Bars," she said—"the flag that we love so well. We wrap it around you,

dear little one. If you had been born within its shelter you never would have died like this. (Williams, *Hallie* 168)

A second important parallel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other Northern abolitionist literature that *Hallie Marshall* subverts is the ominous figure of the slave catcher—the prototype of which Stowe introduced in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the cruel figures who chase Eliza and her child. In another crucial scene in the Yankee's conversion, what he presumes is a brutal chase in which a runaway slave is caught and killed turns out to be a band of slaves cheerfully hunting a raccoon (“dat ‘coon done gib us a heap o’ trouble” [Williams, *Hallie* 84]). Hallie mocks the Yankee for his ignorance: “[D]id you really think that in our new and enlightened South we have negro runaways? How father will laugh when I tell him!” (85). Since these examples illustrate the persistent trivialization of the evil of slavery, they are the most inscrutable in the novel. In dialogue with the literary conventions the novel builds on, however, they form part of the way *Hallie Marshall* plays devil’s advocate in reclaiming outdated ideas to protest the hypocrisy of those ideas that replaced them.

Finally, *Hallie Marshall* draws on the old American tradition of the jeremiad for its most earnest moments. By the end of the novel, the Yankee develops the wish to convert others. He wants to help people in the United States “comprehend how much better condition labor is in, under a system of slavery—with subsistence guaranteed—than it is with freedom in name, and without the means of real independence” (170). While longing for Hallie, he believes that telling his countrymen about the South has become his religious duty. It is revealed that the Yankee wrote the novel to discharge that duty: “Hallie and the Sunny South; how can I show them to others as they appeared to me! I have done my best; I have tried my very utmost to make the girl and the scenes vivid to the minds of those who may chance to read these lines” (176-77). His anxiety to make the Southland real to his reader is both the most explicit statement of purpose in *Hallie Marshall* and the closest parallel to Stowe’s direct address to her readers. The Yankee sees his soiree in a Southern utopia as akin to a divine revelation and returns to preach the gospel in his own reality. It now depends on the reader whether its appeal will resonate.

On the surface, *Hallie Marshall* appears to be a troubling wistful defense of slavery. Yet the unrealistic perfection of the Southland and its inhabitants’ persistent trivialization of slavery are not a sign of Williams’s naiveté. The novel, while not enlightened per se, is not about race: As signaled in its reversal of the North-South gender dynamic and the reversal of the Eliza scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the novel is self-consciously in dialogue with the nostalgia and sentimentalism of these other works, and while it downplays the realities of slavery, it is not actually deluded about

the nature of slavery or the Old South. The Southland is deliberately untenable; it is a land of ideals, a utopian world in another sphere of existence that is accessed through a dream. Williams used this place of fantasy to make a point about what he was really concerned with: his own reality. The only thing he was perhaps wistful about was what the Yankee most admires about the Southland: the natural harmony of its society and the apparent comfort of its working class.

George Fitzhugh's racially compromised ideas about labor fell out of favor definitively after the Union victory and emancipation. Nevertheless, they held (and continue to hold) a reluctant appeal to later readers because they speak to a disenchantment with free labor and the free market that had become more pronounced by Williams's Progressive Era. In *Hallie Marshall*, Williams found a chord of harmony between his idol Henry George, a champion of labor who believed everyone deserved to profit from their own work, and George Fitzhugh, a slavery apologist who was convinced blacks were better off without profit of any kind. While clearly incompatible, Williams connected their ideas as arguments for the dignity and security of the working class, things sorely lacking in Williams's own time. *Hallie Marshall* is a novel so context-bound as to be almost inscrutable, but that is because Williams discovered that an alternate history of the Civil War provided him with a useful vehicle for his own contemporary purpose: an ingenious critique of capitalist exploitation by way of a provocative antebellum discourse that equates wage slavery with black slavery. He wrote the first CWAH neither as a reflection on history and free will nor as a rueful elegy for the Lost Cause. It had a more urgent purpose: a condemnation of Gilded Age America's failure to live up to the American creed.

4. WILLMOTT'S MOCKUMENTARY *C.S.A.: THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA*

The provocative subtext in *Hallie Marshall* leads me to the role of satire in CWAH in general. As illustrated above, the genre of CWAH provides a productive structural framework for intertextuality and subversion, including irony and satire. Kevin Willmott's 2004 mockumentary¹¹ *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* is the most pronounced satire in the CWAH canon. The film presents itself as a documentary from an alternative reality where the Confederacy won 'the War of

11 I use the terms 'mockumentary' or 'film' to refer to *C.S.A.* itself and 'documentary' to refer to the popular historical document it purports to be as part of its satire.

Northern Aggression.’ The mockumentary announces its own satirical intent in its opening epigraph with a quote by George Bernard Shaw: “If you’re going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh; otherwise they’ll kill you” (*C.S.A.* 0:00:45). Some elements of *C.S.A.*’s reversal of history are staples of CWAH: The Confederacy secured recognition and aid from England and France and was able to win the Battle of Gettysburg. It is more unusual that the South then managed to annex the entire North into the Confederacy, resulting in a dystopian alternate present in which the entire continental United States forms a single modern slave state. The sting of this counterfactual scenario lies in the disconcerting parallels between the real America, which prides itself on its racial progress, and a deeply dystopian alternative.

Willmott is a black director, producer, and screenwriter whose work has explored African American history through multiple genres, among them the drama *Ninth Street* (1999) and the science-fiction comedy *Destination Planet Negro* (2013). In *C.S.A.*, Willmott satirizes the history of racism in America by reversing the fates of the North and the South and having the Confederate States of America embark on essentially the same journey of segregation and oppression. The documentary shows that after the North was annexed into the Confederacy, Northerners were placated with the reintroduction of slavery in the North and the promise of tax breaks for new slave owners. In this alternate reality, the term ‘Reconstruction’ refers to a postwar period in which the Confederacy successfully reestablished slavery by ‘reconstructing’ the minds of freed slaves through violent intimidation, a sinister subversion of meaning that, nevertheless, captures reality. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Confederate States of America descends deeper and deeper into racist tyranny: It enslaves Asian immigrants in California, confines Jews to a reservation on Long Island, and wages imperialist wars throughout Central America and the Caribbean to create ‘the Golden Circle,’ after which Jim Crow is imposed on the indigenous population of Mexico.¹² With every turn of events, *C.S.A.* confronts its audience with parallels to US history that beg the question whether racism in the United States would have been all that worse if the racists had won.

As its alternate history unfolds, *C.S.A.* addresses American history to show the entire country corrupted by racism. The film’s deep cynicism is revealed as it becomes apparent that its version of American history corrupts the good and leaves the bad: The crash of 1929 is alleviated by a revival of the transatlantic slave trade, the

12 The Golden Circle was a proposal to annex Mexico and the Caribbean into the Union as slave states, an idea championed by the antebellum secret society of the Knights of the Golden Circle. An allohistorical realization of the Golden Circle is sometimes used in CWAH, as it is in *C.S.A.*, to turn the Confederacy into an imperialist state. Cf. May for an account of the South’s antebellum imperialist designs on the Caribbean including the Golden Circle.

Confederate States side with Germany and deliver the first blow in the war with Japan, but the devastation of the atomic bomb decides World War II as recorded. After the war, the ‘Cotton Curtain’ along the Canadian border protects the Confederacy from abolitionist agitators from a more northern North (to bear out the blending of McCarthyism and abolitionism, the film shows a menacing 1950s public service announcement that warns the viewer that “your neighbor could be an abbie!” [0:57:10]). Meanwhile, President Kennedy is distracted from his intention to end slavery by the Confederacy’s expansionist war in Vietnam, and the social unrest of the 1960s is caused by the John Brown Underground, seen in the Confederacy as nothing but a terrorist organization.

The goal of *C.S.A.*, according to Willmott, “was not to speculate about what could have happened, but to show what did happen,” and he has described the film as “not so much a ‘what-if’ but a ‘what-is’” (qtd. in Halter). This is apparent in the film’s invented history, which is always an arch reassembly of familiar elements with no attempt to divert from historical reality to create its own narrative. The result is a scathing critique of US colonialism—domestic and foreign—that chops up the American historical canon until it is beyond redemption. After the Confederacy’s victory, a choice selection of America’s worthy (among them Garrison, Thoreau, Emerson, and Twain) leave for Canada. Due to the high number of blacks that escape from the Confederacy, Canada becomes the cradle of the twentieth-century musical innovation and, eventually, despite the lack of California sunshine, the capital of pop culture in the world. In *C.S.A.*, America does not even get to take credit for its own detractors, not to mention that the film preempts the potential nuance of an alternative look at cultural diplomacy and imperialism. *C.S.A.*’s critique is more generally directed. An online expanded timeline (2007) to the film calls the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan the Confederacy’s “1st [and] 2nd Crusade[s]” (“Confederate”). This addition is a timely jab at Manifest Destiny in line with the film’s anti-imperialist sensibility. Yet, by this point, the satire has become so all-consuming that its sharpness has become somewhat dulled.

Although the intention of Willmott’s *C.S.A.* seems obvious, the mockumentary is more subtle and ingenious on the topic of the Civil War in popular consciousness. It is here that the film taps into the full potential of its multilayered construction as a documentary inside a documentary. *C.S.A.* is a rebuke of a traditional and persistent narrative of the Civil War as America’s tragic but honorable founding war, an interpretation that undersells sectional hatred and the ugliness of racism in order to

focus on national reconciliation.¹³ In particular, *C.S.A.* lampoons Ken Burns's documentary *The Civil War* (1990), which garnered Emmys, Grammys, Peabody, and Pulitzer awards and has been influential both because it popularized a style of documentary filmmaking and because it generated renewed popular interest in the Civil War. Burns's documentary has been criticized by historians for being a saccharine romance of reunion that underemphasized the problematic aspects of the Southern cause and trapped everyone—Northerner, Southerner, slave—in the same tragically grand epic. At the time of its broadcast, critics called Burns the Homer to America's Iliad, and George F. Will described the series as a “masterpiece of national memory.” More recently, one historian wrote that *The Civil War* “[presented] an unapologetic patriotism and an appealing vision of war as a source of honor, high ideals, and unity of purpose” and described the documentary as “deeply misleading and reductive” (Lundberg). The documentary contained within *C.S.A.* is the AH counterpart to *The Civil War*. It makes frequent use of Burns's trademark technique of incorporating still images into documentaries by zooming and panning across them (Kennedy). As in *The Civil War*, the narrative is provided by historians who speak in a mixture of grand pronouncements and anecdotes laden with meaning. Intermingled are the voices of actors who read quotes from important historical figures like Lincoln, Lee, Grant, Douglass, etc., all of whom deliver emotional punches and cheap takeaways to the events being recounted. The whole is often accompanied by the lone voice of a black woman mournfully chanting the word ‘freedom.’

C.S.A.'s satire comes out best when it invites its audience to see through the manipulation of history in popular culture. While the film's narrators explain how first

13 Cf., in particular, David W. Blight's work *Race and Reunion* and the historical field of Civil War Memory in general. Historians in this field have identified four traditions of ascribing meaning to the war that alternately suffuse personal and collective remembrance through popular culture and political rhetoric. Associated with the warring sections are the Lost Cause of the white South, which holds that the war was a dispute over states' rights in which the South was in the right, and the unionist cause of the North, which sees the war as a fight to preserve the Union and its promise of democracy. On a national level, there is the reconciliationist cause, which casts the war as a tragic but honorable ‘brothers’ war’ and implicitly advocates forgetting the cause of the war to hasten national reconciliation. In contrast, the emancipationist cause of African Americans and neo-abolitionists insists on the centrality of slavery to the war. Most major Civil War Memory scholarship—including Blight's pioneering work and, more recently, Caroline E. Janney's *Remembering the Civil War*—has focused on the struggle between reconciliationist sentiments and the emancipationist legacy in American society as well as the political consequences thereof. Blight's influential conclusion is that Southern and Northern whites fashioned a memory of the war as a fratricidal conflict that united the nation in common valor. This consensus located the cause of the war in a dispute over the states' rights, saw Reconstruction as an unfair humiliation of the South, and, most tragically, left the legacy of slavery and racial strife unresolved.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis came up with his famous ‘Davis Plan’ to reinstate and rejuvenate slavery, the film cuts to a clip from an alternate 1946 movie (in bad Technicolor) in which an earnest query from Davis’s loyal slave Popsy (played by a British thespian in blackface who pronounces “May an old no-count darky like me aks a question, sir?” in Received Pronunciation [0:19:54]) inspires Davis to come up with his historic plan. The film then cuts back to the narrative voice of a historian for the obligatory ‘and the rest is history’ pronouncement. In another section of the film, a historian explains how the novels of the Reconstruction era celebrated reconciliation between the North and South:

Novelists during reconstruction mended the divide between the two regions. In their books, the aims and causes of the war suddenly changed. Slavery is no longer mentioned as the cause of the war. This is key to reconciliation. Thus, the suffering of slaves is ignored. We are presented with only loyal black servants. However, the courage and sacrifice of whites on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line is romantically examined. They struggle to survive, they protect their homes and families. Generals and battlefields take on a new flair, the smallest details become dramatically important. In bestsellers like *My Union Soldier* and *Of Belles and Blue*, Southerners are taught to pity the North, to cry for the Lost Cause of the Union, the misguided attempt to free the slaves. (0:35:46)

This passage illustrates the intricate construction of *C.S.A.*: It criticizes actual reconciliation novels from the late nineteenth century while pretending to be a counterfactual history that is itself coated in the style and cadence of Burns’s late twentieth century dramatization of reunion.

Perhaps the most dazzling example of this construction is the mockumentary’s account of Abraham Lincoln’s postbellum fate. Deposed and hunted, he is escorted by Harriet Tubman to the Canadian border in blackface but is caught and held by Confederates before being allowed to live in exile. The film tells his story through an intercutting of sources. The Confederates gleefully enshrine Lincoln’s capture in popular culture while the documentary tells the story as a tragic fall from grace. Both show Lincoln’s abasement through a form of actual or symbolic blackface. His capture is dramatized in David W. Griffith’s 1915 film *The Hunt for Dishonest Abe* (the Confederacy’s counterpart to *The Birth of a Nation*, which is no less racist), where Lincoln attempts to hide his identity by putting on a Sambo act in which he sings “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and speaks in vernacular: “I ain’t no prez’dent! Pz a darky!” (*C.S.A.* 0:10:30). The documentary then cuts to an interview near the end of Lincoln’s life, where the President laments not making abolition the explicit goal of the Union: “I only wish that I had truly cared for the negro,” he reflects, “I used him. Now

I am used. Now I, too, am a negro” (0:12:40). The film also circles back to a Burnsian vaunt of America’s righteous when one historian tells us that for her part in Lincoln’s escape, Tubman was executed by the South. In the account of Lincoln’s changed fate, *C.S.A.* takes on the emancipator’s hypocritical pragmatism and, by extension, the popular historical understanding that often fails to do it justice, as well as the long history of minstrelsy and racism in Hollywood and cheap popular versions of history that claim the simple and noble elements for the canon and ignore more thorny matters. This moment illustrates the way the multiple levels of *C.S.A.* interact to criticize actual history as well as the way popular history distorts and cheapens that history by both including and taking the form of popular expressions of reconciliation culture.

Yet there is a final level perched on top of this. *C.S.A.* intersperses its documentary with commercial breaks meant to convey the everyday racism of the Confederacy. The ads are jarring evocations of the most offensive and timeworn aspects and ideas about slavery that are rendered in the familiar vapidness of American television ads. Among them are ads for a fried chicken restaurant (“At Coon Chicken Inn, we aim to please!” [0:46:51]), pharmaceutical drugs to control slaves (“Contrari has been known to cause heart attack in some old uncles” [1:09:16]), the Slave Shopping Network (“As with all SSN products, we can either break up Jupiter’s family for you, or you can have them as a set!” [1:14:23]), and the Cartwright Institute for Freedom Illnesses, where Confederate youths too dense to get into medical school learn to treat the same peculiar longing for freedom in the enslaved that baffled Samuel A. Cartwright in the nineteenth century. As a final punch in the comparison between the United States and the Confederacy, *C.S.A.*’s closing credits reveal that many of the products advertised to people living in a dystopian America, including ‘Niggerhair’ cigarettes and ‘Darkie’ toothpaste, existed or continue to exist in our own world.

C.S.A. is a multiedged and often frustrating CWAH because it repeatedly undercuts its own irony to add layer after layer to its satire. It sometimes entangles itself in a string of satirical subversions that threaten to overwhelm its audience. Nevertheless, it delivers moments of searing critique of both the hypocrisy of historical memory and the perversion of historical complexity in public history. At the very end, it incriminates its audience in both processes when it reveals the actual existence of elements they thought part of the satire. The way it turns on its audience fits *C.S.A.* in a recurring function of AH that exposes the ‘alternate’ reality as not that different from ours in order to highlight complacency or hypocrisy in popular understandings of history. However, *C.S.A.* is unique in the lively balance it strikes between mischief and ire, which it achieves through what is perhaps the richest and most sophisticated structure of any CWAH.

5. CONCLUSION

Scholars of alternate history have seen social criticism or any presentist sensibility in the genre as the result of which side of the fantasy-nightmare dichotomy a work can be attributed to. While not wrong as such, this dichotomy appears reductive and inadequate as a reflection of the layered and intriguing forms social criticism takes in CWAH. The examples I have discussed are intricate enough that the identification of their affiliations requires some unpacking. To put it simply, AH does not lend itself to overt political statements. It is too contrary and too premised on subversion. This does not mean that its message is not loud and clear but rather that its message is achieved through covert contrast and implication in stories that decline to spell out what they are here to say. Perhaps it is because these AHs are so inherently allusive that they can feel confining, which might be why CWAH is full of heavy irony and historical parallels that have all the finesse of a sledgehammer. That is a paradox of these stories: Just because they are roundabout or intricate does not mean they are subtle.

While these texts lead to satisfying intellectual puzzles, the authors of the CWAHs analyzed in this article may have needlessly complicated their goal in choosing AH as a vehicle for their act of political writing, since their ideological investments are not immediately apparent. Based on their reception, we might even say these stories failed in their objective, since none of them gained anywhere near the traction or cultural capital of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Burns's *The Civil War*. Additionally, none of them gained the notoriety as social critique that their provocations would seem to aspire to, and none of them are credited in popular memory with unleashing a war between the states. If social critique is best served by a simple message stated plainly, CWAH either cannot or will not heed that advice. But to end on a counterfactual, if CWAH had heeded it, we might have a cultural tradition not half as stimulating as the one we have.

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