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# How to Write a Conference Abstract

The Executive Council of the Emerging Scholars Organization

September 2017

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To secure your place on a conference program, you must submit an abstract of your work for consideration by the conference committee. To find Calls for Papers, you can search the [University of Pennsylvania's database](#) for English conferences, [H-Net's database](#) for interdisciplinary conferences (with an emphasis on American Studies and History), or simply search the focused calls issued by the [flagship organizations](#) in your field. You will find these calls on the organizations' websites. Make sure that you are attentive not simply to the deadlines, but also to yearly conference themes or affiliate organizations that might have particular interest in your subject.

In about 300 words, your conference abstract must accomplish two tasks; it (a) creates a research space that establishes your paper's exigency and (b) offers a tentative statement of your eventual argument. A well-written abstract can provide a brief, skeletal outline for the introduction of your eventual presentation (approximately 8 pages), or even a publishable essay (18 – 25 pages). Before you state your argument, tell your reader to what you are responding. What major ideas in the field inspire your argument? With which pivotal theories do you agree and disagree? If you're using a compelling theory or approach to analyze a text, be sure to establish the terms of that conversation early in your paper without falling into the lure of long summary of another scholar/theorist's ideas. (Remember, your ideas should dominate the abstract, not another scholar's.) Afterwards, you can offer the bare bones of your argument.

Some conferences ask for other information, like a brief biography or abbreviated *curriculum vitae*. A brief biography should include your name, current position (Ph.D. student, Ph.D. candidate, etc.), institution, research interests, and a few notable achievements that are relevant to your paper (e.g. publications, previous conference appearances). Abbreviated CVs are typically no more than two pages in length and include only the most salient sections, prioritized in the following list, until you reach the length limit: name, contact information, affiliation, education, research interests, publications, previous conference presentations, teaching experience, awards, and organization affiliations. Pay attention to calls for papers, as they might ask for more than the abstract.

Below, you will find an abstract from several members of the Executive Council of the Emerging Scholars Organization. Each of these abstracts was accepted for inclusion at a national conference. We hope they prove to be useful models for emerging scholars who are in the process of preparing abstracts for their first conferences, or simply for people who find abstracts to be a challenging genre.

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## The Perverse Pleasure of White Nationalism: A Reading of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*

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Why do so many Americans feel drawn-in to the white nationalist's movement? Because, white nationalism feels good. Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, is a specimen of a turn-of-the-century popular text ripe for analysis concerning low art genre, pleasure, and the fluidity of affect aided by popular culture. My paper uses genre analysis and affect theory to map how, through the romantic racism and sentimentalism of the text, Dixon generates and builds different forms of pleasures for his readers. My critique of this product (and, indeed, the text and the phenomenon of white nationalism) is that this type of pleasure is perverse.

The pleasure of white nationalism, as represented in *The Clansman*, is a mixture of *schadenfreude*, an enjoyment of one's own crises, the exhilaration of crusading, righteous contempt, and indignant pride. Throughout the course of the novel, Dixon, a former Baptist and nondenominational preacher, links Christianity with white nationalism as a way to tap into Christianity's embedded embattlement against outside encroachment and to promote an atmosphere of perpetual crisis and attack. *The Clansman* is not just low art or popular art, but morally bad art. It is a text that pleases our more perverse nature. I argue that the pleasure of white nationalism derives from its perpetual accessibility: since whiteness is always under attack, the catalyst for righteous indignation and for staying worked up is always at hand.

Other scholars will find my paper polemical not because it is an argument against white nationalism, but because of my open and free use of the phrase "perverse pleasure." Recent movements criticizing "symptomatic reading" decry close readings which offer diagnostic claims. A small section of this paper is a defense of identifying the perverse in American culture. Through an analysis of *The Clansman*, my paper shows that it is not academically old fashioned to identify and critique aspects of cultural phenomena that link pleasure and racism. The case of *The Clansman* is one wherein popular culture taps popular myth and catches fire. It taps into the grosser pleasures of human beings, and hides its perverse nature under the guise of righteous Christian embattlement.

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## New York and New Orleans: The History of a Romance

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### Scene I: Two Mayors

While his city mourned and marked the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu flew to Washington DC for an address to the National Press Club, where he promoted the City that Care Forgot as a “laboratory for innovation and change.” One might breathe with relief that he transcended two centuries of totemic references to New Orleans’s singularity. And yet ‘most unique’ was replaced with “coolest,” the superlative with which he ended the address. Landrieu locates the city’s power in terms borrowed from libertarian Richard Florida’s encomiums to the creative class; a renaissance becomes possible with an influx of “passionate young people” working in a privatized and charterized school system, as well as New Orleans’s famous art and music scenes. Though Landrieu’s address seems exemplary of neoliberalism – the American academy’s current shibboleth – it has precedents, perhaps underscoring Adolph Reed’s sense that neoliberalism is simply a euphemism for old, familiar capitalism, born in the banks of the North and the swamps of the South in the radical expansions and exploitations of the 1840s.

A century and a half before Landrieu, another unabashed capitalist wrote a paean to New Orleans that placed it on the other end of a sparking circuit from New York City, “the capital of capital” (Jaffe and Lautin, 2014). Abraham Oakey Hall, who would, over the course of his strange career, work as law clerk in the pre-secession offices of Confederate Secretary of War Judah Benjamin, provide legal counsel for anarchist Emma Goldman, serve as Mayor of New York City, and sink into infamy with the spectacular crooks of the Tammany Hall Gang, wrote *The Manhattaner in New Orleans* (1851). Rather than proffer the image of New Orleans as idle and slow – a place we are invited to think of as “the worst-organized city in the United States” or “the best-organized city in the Caribbean” in Dan Baum’s symptomatic *Nine Lives* (2010, xi) – Hall offers a radically different New Orleans. An altar of Mammon, a “Tower of Babel,” a polyglot paradise, the “boarding-house of the United States,” and the “Calcutta of America,” it is a place where young men come to “battle with fate or to court fortune[,] to amass wealth, and...return *home* to spend it” (18, 7, 21, 23). In a bird’s eye view of the Exchange, Hall describes the power of industry and the potential for lucre, personified by the bankers and brokers in cotton, sugar, tobacco, and flour; he invites the “Congress of nations” and “the human swallow-birds of passage” further South to the mouth of the Mississippi (18, 32). Hall’s New Orleans is, like Landrieu’s, “a laboratory of innovation and change.” One hundred and sixty years after the innovations and changes it wrought, there is no shock of the new in Hall’s formulation. Perhaps there is a shock of the familiar.

### Scene II: The Sixth Borough and the Eighteenth Ward

Though my introduction explores the two “New” cities as sites of radical extraction and exploitation for American capital through a close reading of Hall, I would be remiss if I did not explore the powerful affective pulls between New Orleans and New York for figures as various as Truman Capote, Herbert Asbury, Tom Dent, Lillian Hellman, and Ishmael Reed, who referred to the Crescent City as “125 and ½ Street” (quoted in Eckstein 2005, 134). This essay seeks to reveal the push-and-pull of two longstanding traditions: the southward suction of bohemian New Yorkers to New Orleans, and the “flush times and fever dreams” of the hustlers and hawkers who traveled the same route in pursuit of cash (Rothman 2012). The purpose of the analogy I pursue here is not to dismantle either city’s access to

“cool,” but to hold them together and apart, to at once demonstrate their intimacy and separate the sparking ends of the circuit that could allow Reed and others to disappear in the constant conquest of “cool” that characterizes Landrieu and Hall’s boosterism.

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## “Choked Off by the Fire and Smoke”: Music, Mobility, and Violence in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

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Scholarship on James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* has, for at least the last 15 years, focused on the usage of music within his writing and the narrative surrounding the unnamed protagonist. Much of that critical work has characterized ragtime and other genres within the African-American musical tradition as means of escape and world-forming for the Ex-Colored Man as well as the wider black population. In this project, I look to re-consider this analysis and focus on the historical narrative surrounding the publication history of Johnson’s influential work. While Johnson sought a new and liberating black aesthetic throughout his life, a series of legislative measures aimed at curbing black movement inhibited this endeavor. The United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* coincides with a time in American history when black subjects used music to combat oppressive forces. Johnson, aware of this reality, used his writing and music to carve a place within the spaces dictated to black bodies. Through exploring the initial anonymous publication of the novel in 1912 as well as the one bearing Johnson’s name in 1927, one can see the ways in which black life and art struggled against the spatial limitations of both political and popular segregation. The height of the black arts movement in which the second publication appeared stands as a zenith following the “nadir” in the earlier part of the century, and tracing this history informs our reading of the text. Given that understanding, we are able to consider music’s operation and possible failure within a text considered by many to be the harbinger of black artistic consciousness in the early twentieth century and the possibilities for imagined u- and dystopias in Jacksonville and the rest of the United States.

### Biography

Will Palmer a Ph.D. student and graduate teaching assistant at the University of Mississippi. His scholarship focuses on the intersection of music and literature especially as it pertains to racial relations and spatial politics from modernity to the present day. He has a forthcoming chapter co-written with Erich Nunn covering the cultural history of southern music in Routledge’s *Handbook of the South*.

### A/V Requirements

None

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## The Myth of U.S. Antebellum Exceptionalism: Slavery, Capital, and Anteliberism in Southern Literature

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In *Government and the American Economy* (2008), Jeffery Rogers Hummel asserts that, before the U.S. Civil War, “[i]t is commonly agreed that Americans once enjoyed a degree of liberty from government that was extraordinary in the annals of civilization” (189). Indeed, both (white) neoliberal economists and a broader (white) citizenry “commonly” regard the pre-emancipation era with nostalgia, believing American freedoms truly were exceptional “in the annals of civilization.” Notwithstanding Hummel’s glaring exclusion of African and Native Americans from his connotation of “Americans,” the myth of a once wholly-free nation-state continues to seduce U.S. polity with both its longing to “restore” society to unadulterated economic liberty and its indefensible claims to civil freedoms.

My paper takes to task this myth of U.S. antebellum exceptionalism by investigating Charles Chesnut’s “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887) as a model of literary subversion. Chesnut’s story relates a pre-Civil War tale of enslaved Henry whose enslaver profiteers from his volatile health after Henry is bewitched by a grapevine. Chesnut’s story eviscerates those unconscionable economic and corporeal logics underwriting neoliberal fetishization of the pre-Civil War era, and through his tale, I propose a literary and historical rubric for subverting the myth of U.S. antebellum exceptionalism. This rubric, what I call American *anteliberism*, triangulates capitalism, corporeality, and citizenship in enslaving logics as they are reincarnated throughout U.S. history in policies governing the body (e.g. marriage prohibitions). By applying anteliberism to southern texts that narrate corporeal violence under early U.S. liberalism, we can establish new inroads for subverting the neoliberal myth of pre-Civil War exceptionalism and the ongoing violence it inspires.

### Biography

Stephanie Rountree is a postdoctoral teaching fellow in the English Department at Auburn University. She received her Ph.D. in 2017 at Georgia State University where she studied American literature. Her work has appeared in such publications as *south*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, *Ethos*, and *Carson McCullers and the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave Macmillan). She is also a co-editor of the forthcoming collection *Small-Screen Souths: Region, Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Television* (LSU Press).

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## Menstruating Monsters: Werewolves and Womanhood in Alan Moore's Saga of the Swamp Thing

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Oftentimes, zombies, werewolves, monsters, and other not-quite-human supernatural creatures are read as the embodiment of social and personal fears; each creature represents humankind's fear that we may lose control over our own bodies—a human-becoming-primal or human-becoming-animal. However, in *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, which takes place in a world where nuclear fallout has polluted the earth enough to create sentient plant matter, Alan Moore creates monsters that are strikingly human, despite their monstrous bodies, frequently eliciting more sympathy and affection from the reader than characters that appear more “human.”

One example of a strikingly human monster occurs in “The Curse,” where Moore ties menstruation to lycanthropy. The comic begins with Phoebe in a supermarket, purchasing sanitary napkins (134). Interspersed with images of Phoebe in the supermarket are images of the fictional “Pennamaquot women” who were “each month... confined in a red lodge” while they were menstruating, “forbidden to stand or lie down, or see the moon” (134). Later, after her husband, Roy, makes several misogynist comments, Phoebe's anger overtakes her, and she transforms into a werewolf (142). The Swamp Thing initially responds to Roy's cries for help, but he is barred from interfering because “the elemental energies are strong” in Phoebe, and he consequently “does not have the right... the authority... to stay her hand” (147). Despite the Swamp Thing's inability to interfere, Phoebe cannot commit violence against her verbally abusive husband: “Ugly man. Cowardly man... And in the end, she still cannot bring herself to do it” (148). Despite her body becoming monstrous, Phoebe ultimately remains human. In the end, she sacrifices herself to avoid committing violence against others, throwing her body onto a Vines 2 display of silver knives at the supermarket, which bears the sardonic label “Here's good news for housewives!” (154).

In her article “Of Slaves and Other Swamp Things,” Qiana J. Whitted points out that “Moore's so-called zombies resist the dehumanization of the monster trope by voicing familial affections” (199). Whitted's analysis of the zombies in *Swamp Thing*, indicates that, again, Moore creates monstrous “foes” that are ultimately more human than monster. Whitted quotes Kevin Alexander Boon's notion of “the human self and the monstrous other” to assert that Moore's zombies confound the reader's expectations by having “interior lives and longings” (197-198). My conference paper extends Whitted's analysis to consider how Phoebe transcends stereotypical deployments of monstrosity in popular culture and invites readers to critically investigate social codes that might label Phoebe's justifiable rage as “monstrous.”