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"STILL DREAMING OF PARADISE":

RODGERS AND HAMMERSTEIN'S
OKLAHOMA!, *SOUTH PACIFIC*,
AND POSTWAR AMERICA

by

RANDALL IVES BOND

B.S., Bowdoin College, 1967
M.A., Harvard University, 1969
M.L.S., Syracuse University, 1973
M.Phil., Syracuse University, 1995

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Humanities in the Graduate School
of Syracuse University
December 1996

Approved

Professor David Tatham

Date

16 December 1996

ABSTRACT

Oklahoma! and *South Pacific* were Rodgers and Hammerstein's most successful and popular musicals of the 1940s. This study demonstrates their function as modern morality plays for their audiences. Specifically, the two musicals provided Americans with a prescription for a postwar Paradise. This was a Paradise based upon the American Dream of rebirth and renewal acted out in a landscape of second chances. The components of this Paradise are examined in topical essays that consider such issues as Americanism, consumerism, tourism, racism, and optimism. Each of these elements links what would otherwise appear to be disparate narratives: the American West at the turn of the century and the South Seas during World War II. The most significant connection between the two musicals and the basis for a postwar Paradise is the geopolitics of an expanding American frontier, paralleling the nation's evolution from a national to a global power in the years during and after World War II.

Sources such as Western films and recordings of the singing cowboys, popular images of the Pacific Islands, travel literature and advertisements, anthropological and sociological tracts on race and ethnicity, the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, and foreign policy publications are used to demonstrate *Oklahoma!*'s and *South Pacific*'s connections to contemporary discourses and to provide historical and cultural contexts for understanding the musicals.

Finally, Chapter 7 explores the relationship between the emergent postwar youth culture (the "Children of Paradise") and the issues raised by the musicals.

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**The Graduate School
Syracuse University**

We, the members of the Oral Examination Committee,
hereby approve the dissertation of

Randall I. Bond

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INTRODUCTION PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PARADISE

*Oh, what a beautiful mornin'.
Oh, what a beautiful day.
I got a beautiful feelin'
Ev'rythin's goin' my way
--Curly McLain, Oklahoma!¹*

*Now, now I'm alone,
Still dreaming of Paradise.
Still saying that Paradise
Once Nearly was mine.
--Emile de Becque, South Pacific²*

The Musical

The musical is a major genre in both American theater and film. It has been a highly successful art form from the days of Jerome Kern's productions at the Princess Theater (1915-1918) through the contemporary creations of Stephen Sondheim. Throughout the twentieth century, the musical has served as an important source of entertainment for the American public. In its mature form, however, which developed in the 1940s, the musical has gone beyond mere entertainment and become serious musical drama. It has taken on a didactic function becoming a type of morality play. Rick Altman has suggested that it serves the function of myth in American culture where it is used by

¹Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *6 Plays* (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 8.

²*Ibid.*, 347.

Americans to work out their problems and demonstrate important ideas about the nation.³

Among the creators and masters of the serious musical drama were Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II.

Rodgers and Hammerstein

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II collaborated on their first Broadway musical in 1943 when they created *Oklahoma!* for the Theater Guild. Broadway history was made on March 31, 1943 with the opening of the show at the St. James Theater.

Oklahoma! ran for 2,248 performances until May 29, 1948 and became one of the great Broadway success stories of the twentieth century, establishing the team of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Like the 1927 Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II production of *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!* emphasized the storyline, with all of its elements, from songs to dance numbers, integrated into the plot and moving the story forward.

In *Oklahoma!* and in subsequent productions, Richard Rodgers created the music for each show while Oscar Hammerstein II was responsible for the libretto and lyrics. In considering the creative process behind their songs, it is not readily apparent whether there were one or two minds at work. Essentially, it was a team effort in which Rodgers' melodies underscored and conveyed the import of Hammerstein's carefully chosen lyrics. Although reference will be made to the musical component of the shows, the main thrust of this study will be an examination of their literary content.

³Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

Between 1943 and 1959 (when Hammerstein died) Rodgers and Hammerstein collaborated on eleven musicals: nine for the Broadway stage, one for Hollywood, and another for television. In chronological order these were *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *State Fair* (1945-film), *Allegro* (1947), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *Me and Juliet* (1953), *Pipe Dream* (1955), *Cinderella* (1957-television), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), and *The Sound of Music* (1959). Hollywood has made films of six of the stage productions: *Oklahoma!* (1955), *Carousel* (1956), *The King and I* (1956), *South Pacific* (1958), *Flower Drum Song* (1961) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). This study will concentrate on two of the classic stage productions of the 1940s: *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*.

Cowboys and Soldiers

One might describe *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* as musicals about cowboys and soldiers respectively. *Oklahoma!* was based upon Lynn Riggs' 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The narrative is set in Oklahoma Indian Territory in 1900. It is the story of clean-living singing cowboy Curly McLain (Alfred Drake) and his love for Laurey Williams (Joan Roberts) who lives on an Oklahoma farm with her Aunt Eller (Betty Garde).

Laurey is also the object of the lecherous desires of dark and surly farmhand Jud Fry (Howard da Silva). The plot's tension is generated by Laurey's indecision about who she will choose to escort her to a picnic social to be given at a nearby farm. Laurey really loves Curly and is only being coy with him. The rivalry between Curly and Jud leads to violence when Laurey eventually rebuffs Jud and accepts Curly's proposal of marriage. In

a jealous rage on the night of the couple's wedding, Jud attacks Curly with a knife. In the scuffle that ensues, Curly kills Jud but is acquitted on the spot and the couple is free to begin their married life in anticipation of Oklahoma's eventual statehood. Comic relief during the musical is provided by Ado Annie (Celeste Holm), the "girl who just cain't say no" and her inability to decide whether she should marry the peddler Ali Hakim (Joseph Buloff) or cowboy Will Parker (Lee Dixon).

South Pacific was adapted from James Michener's best-selling 1947 novel *Tales of the South Pacific*. The musical opened on Broadway on April 7, 1949, achieving immediate acclaim from both critics and audiences. It became one of the great success stories of the musical stage, receiving the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1950 and a number of the prestigious Tony and Donaldson Awards. Set on the islands of the New Hebrides during World War II, *South Pacific* interweaves two love stories. The first of these involves the two main characters, Nellie Forbush (Mary Martin), a naive Navy nurse from Little Rock, Arkansas, and Emile de Becque (Ezio Pinza), a sophisticated French plantation owner in the islands. Nellie's love for Emile is tested when she discovers that Ngana (Barbara Luna) and Jerome (Michael De Leon), two children living on the plantation, are Emile's by a Polynesian woman who is now deceased. As a Southerner, she is appalled by the very suggestion of miscegenation. However, when Emile goes on a dangerous mission to spy on the Japanese forces, Nellie overcomes her prejudice and decides that she will marry him when he returns, becoming a mother to his mixed-race children.

The second love theme of *South Pacific* centers around a young Marine lieutenant, Joseph Cable (William Tabbert) and a Tonkinese (Indochinese) girl named Liat (Betta St. John). Despite his passionate feelings, Cable realizes that he cannot marry the young Asian and bring her back to Philadelphia as his bride. After breaking off his relationship with her, he decides to accompany de Becque on his island spying mission where he is killed by a Japanese sniper. Comic relief is provided by the antics of Seabee Luther Billis (Myron McCormick) and his entrepreneurial rivalry with the Tonkinese trader Bloody Mary (Juanita Hall), Liat's mother, over the production and sale of souvenirs on the island.

Prescriptions for Paradise

The narratives of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, although set in earlier times than the circumstances of their productions (turn of the century for the 1943 show and World War II for the 1949 postwar creation), acted as modern day morality plays speaking to the concerns of postwar Americans.

As a result of economic and geopolitical changes brought about by World War II, the United States achieved global hegemony during the 1940s. Such success created a renewed belief in the American Dream of an earthly Paradise, which had been disrupted by the crises of economic depression and war between 1929 and 1945. In the postwar years, Americans were still dreaming of Paradise. The essence of that postwar dream was a belief in rebirth and renewal, opportunity, and expanding frontiers. It is the thesis of the following study that Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* provided

audiences with a prescription for a postwar Paradise, characterized by American global hegemony, the economics of consumerism, a preoccupation with tourism and leisure, and the quest for tolerance and community. The foundation of such a Paradise would be the philosophy of liberal optimism and an ideology of frontier expansionism. Although the two musicals are separated by locale and plot, I will argue that they are intimately related by these issues and that there is an evolution from a national to a global perspective in keeping with the historical situation during which they were produced.

The material is organized into seven essays and a conclusion. Chapter 1 explores the nature of American identity at home and abroad through the relation of the musicals to the popular culture genres of the Western and the war story. Chapter 2 considers the socioeconomics of a consumer-based society in an increasingly global context. Chapter 3 looks at *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* as “armchair musicals” with their emphasis upon the experience of tourism and leisure. Travel to the American West and the South Seas is viewed in its twentieth century context. Chapter 4 examines the search for community through the pursuit of tolerance toward individuals of different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. The central problem of racism in the twentieth century is also addressed. The politics of liberal optimism as represented by Rodgers and Hammerstein is considered in Chapter 5. This philosophic outlook is contrasted with the pessimistic 1940s writings of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. In Chapter 6 the geopolitical ideology of frontier expansionism is shown to link the two musicals both thematically and historically as the nation moved its frontiers from the American West into the Pacific Rim from the 1890s forward. Finally, Chapter 7, entitled

“The Children of Paradise,” examines the relationship between the emergent postwar youth culture (the so-called “baby boom” generation) and the issues raised by the musicals. Chapter 7 demonstrates that the concerns and themes of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* were part of a larger historical process extending into the 1960s when this generation came of age. The social function of music as a purveyor of values and ideals links the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the concerns of the Children of Paradise as expressed in the folksong revival of the 1950s and 60s.

Examination of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* in relation to one another and in their temporal context makes possible a greater understanding of their role in shaping both historical and popular discourses in postwar America. The years of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s hegemony upon the Broadway stage were, after all, closely paralleled by the nation’s dominance on the global stage of international relations and foreign policy.

CHAPTER 1

AN AMERICAN PARADISE: THE COWBOY AND THE SOLDIER

Introduction

In 1941, on the eve of World War II, Henry Luce, founder and publisher of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* described the twentieth century as “The American Century.” In an essay of that title published in *Life* (17 February 1941), Luce outlined the nature of America’s hegemonic role in the world:

As America enters dynamically upon the world scene we need most of all to seek and to bring forth a vision of America as a world power which is authentically American and which can inspire us to live and work and fight with vigor and enthusiasm.¹

The emphasis placed upon the “American” nature of this world is also the subject of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. In the musicals’ examination of a postwar Paradise, the American component is an important one and a good place to begin our study. In their emphasis upon the American, *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* participated in an important discourse characteristic of the 1940s: the attempt to define the American character at a time when democratic values were under siege, first from the fascist challenge of World War II and subsequently from Communism during the Cold War.

¹Henry Luce, “The American Century,” in *The Ideas of Henry Luce*, ed. John K. Jessup (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 118.

The desire to define the American character in the 1940s manifested itself in a number of books published at the time, such as James Truslow Adams' *The American: The Making of a New Man* (1943) and Denis W. Brogan's *The American Character* (1944). Cultural anthropologists such as Margaret Mead also joined in this wartime effort with *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942), her examination of American identity in a global perspective. Chapter 8, "Building the World New," espoused the philosophy of an American led "One Worldism." *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, in their examination of the American character at home and abroad, were a part of this broader decade phenomenon.

Americana and the Folk

Oklahoma! was representative of a fascination with American history and culture that developed during the Depression and extended into World War II. This type of subject matter became an important national focus in the 1930s when New Deal agencies, such as the WPA, supported artists, writers, and composers in projects that were meant to capture the spirit of the nation through a cultural examination of its past. This interest led to numerous examples of Americana: stories, plays, songs, and works of art with American history, geography, or folklore as their focus in an attempt to portray what was considered to be typically American. Among the best known examples of this Americana were the paintings of Regionalist artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, the photographs of Dorothea Lange, Marion Post Woolcott, and others taken for the Farm Security Administration and the WPA United States travel guides. In the 1930s these examples of Americana placed an emphasis upon the regional

characteristics of America. However, as World War II approached, they became more nationalistic and patriotic in outlook. In these later examples, the story of a particular region acted as a symbol for all America. This was the case with *Oklahoma!* which had begun life as a Regionalist drama of the 1930s.

In 1931 Oklahoma playwright Lynn Riggs wrote *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which was meant to capture the flavor of cowboys and farmers of the Oklahoma Indian Territory around 1900. Riggs used the play as a vehicle for authentic cowboy and folk songs he had heard as a child growing up in Oklahoma. The author had suggested that an appropriate subtitle for his play might be “An Old Song” for “like the old songs of its period, it tries to reproduce a gone age in the Middle West--its quaintness, its absurdity, its sentimentality, its pathetic and childish melodrama, its rude vigor, its touching sweetness. . . .”² In 1932 Samuel French published a separate anthology of these songs entitled *Cowboy Songs, Folk Songs, and Ballads from Green Grow the Lilacs* ranging in style and content from the sentimental to the historical and patriotic.

Green Grow the Lilacs was meant to be a folk play like Dubose and Dorothy Hayward’s *Porgy* (1927) which was later converted into George Gershwin’s folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935). The American folk were an important component of 1930s and 1940s Americana. Jane Becker has suggested that twentieth century Americans’ interest in their folk roots was a response to the increasing complexity of modern life.

²Phyllis Cole Braunlich, *Haunted by Home: The Life and Letters of Lynn Riggs* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 73.

This caused Americans to seek connections with a perceived simpler, more natural, pre-industrial past. In this search [Americans] have consistently turned to idealized concepts of the 'folk' to define and sustain notions of community amid rapid and disruptive change.³

In *Green Grow the Lilacs* and its musical transformation, *Oklahoma!*, the folk (turn-of-the-century farmers and cowboys) helped to define a national culture and identity in a changing world. This preoccupation with the folk represented an idealization of those things missing in modern life and a retreat into a romanticized past.

Western Americana

Oklahoma! was a primary example of wartime Americanism typical of the home front in the first half of the 1940s. By Americanism I am referring to the idea of a patriotic nationalism, characterized by the idea of exceptionalism in which the United States and the American experience were meant to stand apart from those of Europe and the Old World and to serve as a model or paradigm for other nations and peoples. It is also characterized by an optimistic self-confidence, allowing Americans to walk tall and proud. In its negative form, it can produce such traits as ethnocentrism (the idea that one's own nation or culture is superior to all others), racism, and cultural imperialism (the impact of an external culture on a local one in which the external comes to dominate and then replaces the local culture--e.g., American products like Coca Cola and McDonald's

³Jane S. Becker and Barbara Franco, eds., *Folk Roots, New Roots: Folklore in American Life* (Lexington, Mass: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1988), 19.

replacing local products in Third World nations). Thus, Americanism may be coupled with economic, racial, and cultural factors.

The Western

In 1943 when *Oklahoma!* opened on the New York stage in the middle of the Second World War, it offered the audience a retreat into an earlier, more romantic period of American history. In telling the simple story of an Oklahoma cowboy in love with a pretty farm girl, the musical tapped into an established genre of symbolic Americana: the Western. In the twentieth century, the Western had become a dominant literary and cinematic formula. By restoring a sense of national pride and rekindling the pioneer spirit of America, the Western helped mitigate the fears and failures of the Great Depression. During World War II the Western provided a nation-defining narrative and a sense of identity and unity for a nation immersed in a global war.

There is general agreement among scholars that the West and the frontier experience have been among the dominant myths shaping the American character (or identity). During World War II, Rodgers and Hammerstein appropriated the myth of the American West for patriotic purposes. Integral to the use of the myth in *Oklahoma!* was the cowboy who became a symbol of patriotism during wartime.

Oklahoma! participates in the central narrative structure of the Western and the American myth of the West. At the core of this structure is the dialectic between individualism and community. A nation at war needs to project a unified front to the world, so a story emphasizing the search for community was an appropriate narrative for

the 1940s. The community in question was the Indian Territory of Oklahoma in 1900. The central players in this particular narrative are cowboys and farmers with names like McLain and Williams. These two populations (ranchers and farmers) were typically portrayed as antagonists in popular Westerns of the 1930s and 1940s. They provided the subject of “range wars” found in many Western novels and films. Their potential antagonism in *Oklahoma!* is presented in the song “The Farmer and the Cowman” which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The rivalry between these two groups, however, is not the only danger to community in *Oklahoma!* for, as in most Westerns, there is a villain who represents an even greater threat. In *Oklahoma!* this is farmhand Jud Fry who works for Aunt Eller and her niece, Laurey Williams. Jud lusts for the pretty young woman and skulks around the farm spying on her every move. It is his desire for her which brings about his confrontation with Curly McLain, the cowboy hero of the story. Together, the two men represent the conventions of light and dark as symbols of good and evil associated with the protagonists of the Western. Curly wears a bright yellow shirt and a red neckerchief. In contrast Jud’s clothing is dark and dirty and he lives in an old smokehouse evoking images of netherworlds.

The Western is typically set in a frontier environment, which represents a borderland separating civilization from the wilderness. It is the role of the cowboy hero to protect the civilized aspects of the frontier from the savage elements of the surrounding wilderness. Jud Fry clearly represents those savage elements which must be overcome if civilization is to endure and develop. By 1900, the main source of “savagery,” the

Indians, had been significantly marginalized in this environment so that they no longer posed a threat to the community.

In the cowboy's confrontation with evil, there exists the threat of violence which he tries to avoid as long as possible. This is the nature of Curly's response to Jud. Curly at first tries to get Jud to dispatch himself when he sings "Pore Jud is dead." The basic premise of the song is that people would more readily show their "love" for Jud at his funeral than during his lifetime. When Curly visits Jud in the smokehouse, Jud is cleaning a .45 caliber pistol. At one point, Jud fires the pistol into a wall of the smokehouse in an effort to intimidate Curly and thus discourage him from trying to escort Laurey to the box social. Curly responds by firing his own pistol through a knothole in one of the walls to show Jud that he is a good shot himself. The life and death confrontation of these two men is acted out as a symbolic shooting match. Such gunplay is another basic motif of the American Western.

Curly and Jud's rivalry eventually ends in violence. In a fit of jealous rage, Jud grabs a knife and attacks the new groom. In the ensuing struggle Curly kills Jud. In order to rid the community of the evil represented by the surly farmhand, Curly reluctantly resorted to violence. As Janice Rushing observed in her study of the rhetoric of the American Western myth, this episode illustrates the characteristic of the Western hero who, at some point in the narrative, has to face the fact that "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."⁴

⁴Janice Hocker Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth," *Communications Monographs* 50 (March 1983): 20.

The character of Laurey Williams illustrates another element of the Western, the role of the heroine as a symbol of civilization and culture in the wilderness. The Dream Ballet that ends Act I is entitled "Laurey makes up her mind." Debating whether she should go to the box social with Curly or with Jud, she falls asleep on the farmhouse porch and dreams about the impending conflict between the two men. An important part of the Dream Ballet in the context of the Western is the portrayal of two types of women found on the American western frontier. On one side are innocent farm girls of pioneer stock like Laurey herself. They represent values associated with home, family, and community. On the other side are the dance hall girls of Jud's imagination. They represent a rough, bawdy, untamed frontier. The ballet effectively reinforces the narrative's dialectic of civilization and savagery.⁵

It is significant in this context that the purpose of the box social is to raise money to build a schoolhouse for the community and that this project is carried out by the women under the leadership of Aunt Eller. The schoolmarm, like the pioneer farm woman, was another motif symbolizing the coming of civilization to the frontier. The schoolhouse and the saloon/brothel represented the two sides of the Western community. In *Oklahoma!*, thanks to the initiatives of women like Aunt Eller, the schoolhouse and civilization triumph.

⁵The same confrontation would appear in the 1945 film musical *The Harvey Girls*, which was inspired by the success of *Oklahoma!*. In *The Harvey Girls*, civilization is represented by Judy Garland and her companions who serve healthy and wholesome meals for travelers to the American Southwest at one of the well-known Harvey House restaurants set up along the routes of the Santa Fe Railroad. Across the street there is a saloon where Angela Lansbury and her dance hall girls cater to the baser instincts of their male clientele.

Laurey represents another aspect of the role of the feminine in the typical Western: the stabilizing influence of the woman, which helped to domesticate the lifestyle of the usually mobile Western male. Curly is willing to sacrifice his life as a cowboy for the love of a woman. At the auction of box lunches prepared by the women of the community, he gives up the symbolic trappings of his former occupation: his gun, his saddle, and his horse so that he might outbid Jud for Laurey's lunch basket. The proceeds from these cowboy accoutrements provide additional capital for the community's first schoolhouse. At the same time, they symbolize a transformation in Curly with his acceptance of responsibility for the future welfare of the community. The civilizing influence of the feminine on Curly is best summed up in his speech in Act II, Scene 2, after he has asked Laurey to marry him and she has accepted:

Curly: I'll be the happiest man alive soon as we're married. Oh, I got to learn to be a farmer. I see that! Quit a-thinkin' about th'owin' the rope, and start to git my hands blistered in a new way! Oh, things is changin' right and left! Buy up mowin' machines, cut down the prairies! Shoe yer horses, drag them plows under the sod! They gonna make a state outa this, they gonna put it in the union! Country a-changin' got to change with it! Bring up a pair of boys, new stock: to keep up 'th the way things is goin' in this here crazy country! Now I got you to he'p me. I'll 'mount to sumpin' yit!⁶

To help meet the demands of the community for cooperation and conformity, Curly has given up his roving life on the range and settled down in a marriage that brings together the interests of farmer and rancher. Janice Rushing reminds us that in the context

⁶Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 71.

of the American myth of the West “the cattleman, one of the myth’s most enduring heroes, was both a pioneer and a *man of property* [my emphasis].”⁷

In exchanging the cowboy’s sixgun for the farmer’s plow, Curly enacted another important element of the myth of the American West: the myth of the Garden. Associated with that myth are images of fecundity and growth. Such images comprise the lyrics of the musical’s finale “Oklahoma!”:

Brand-new state
Gonna treat you great!
Gonna give you barley,
Carrots and pertaters--
Pasture for the cattle--
Spinach and termayrters!
Flowers on the prairie where the June bugs zoom--
Plen’y of air and plen’y of room--⁸

This song, with its promise for the future, would have appealed to wartime audiences who were looking forward to a new, more abundant life after the exigencies of the Great Depression and World War II. This sense of hope and abundance were an important part of the formula for a postwar Paradise.⁹

⁷Rushing, “American Western Myth,” 16.

⁸Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 75-76.

⁹The transformation that Curly undergoes from a cowboy with a gun to a farmer with a plow is reminiscent of a painting by Winslow Homer that was created after the Civil War. Entitled *Veteran in a New Field* (1865), it portrays a farmer cutting wheat in a field. The title is a pun on the word “field” and most likely represents a Civil War veteran who has exchanged the field of battle for the field of the farmer. World War II servicemen who saw wartime productions of the musical would have related to the idea of exchanging their military lives for more domestic ones in the postwar world.

Through alliance with the Western, *Oklahoma!* established a patriotic discourse derived from ideas and values associated with the genre. It emphasized a “can do” message typical of American popular culture during the war years. It said, “We can work together to defeat the barbaric and savage forces threatening the civilized world.” Teamwork and community were considered essential components of the war effort.

The B Western

In creating a Western for the Broadway stage, Rodgers and Hammerstein borrowed elements from a particular subgenre of the form: the B Western. The designation B Westerns signifies that these were low budget productions by so-called “poverty-row” studios such as Mascot and Republic Pictures rather than by mainline “A” type features of the major studios like MGM, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox.

The B Western had developed in the 1930s as a response to the needs of Depression era audiences. In tone and content it was upbeat and patriotic and helped to provide a populist New Deal discourse for its audience. This type of Western appealed especially to young people and rural audiences of the southern and western regions of the nation.¹⁰ It became a staple element of the Saturday matinee attended by children from the 1930s through the 1950s. Before television, it provided young people with the major source of inspiration for playing cowboys and Indians. On another level, it served as a

¹⁰Richard M. Hurst, *Republic Studios: Between Poverty Row and the Majors* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979).

form of history lesson about the American frontier experience. It was a primary genre helping young people to act out their nation's history in the backyards and playgrounds of America.

In the B Western (as in *Oklahoma!*) there was a sharp demarcation between good and evil. The cowboy hero usually wore a white hat and light colored clothing in contrast to the villain who was dark and somber in attitude and dress. The hero usually had a faithful and frequently comedic sidekick and a talented and equally faithful horse. In *Oklahoma!*, Curly, Jud, and Will Parker fill the roles of cowboy hero, dark villain, and comedic sidekick.

The relationship of the B Western cowboy hero to the female lead usually began as a difficult one, most often the result of some misunderstanding between them or as a result of a coquettish attitude on the part of the heroine. Both of these characteristics are exemplified in *Oklahoma!* by the relationship of Curly and Laurey.

The B Western was intimately related to the periods of economic depression and war that characterized American society in the 1930s and 1940s. The heroes and settings for these sagebrush dramas provided a combination of escapism and vicarious experience for their audiences. Their popularity also suggests a nostalgia for a mythic and more certain American past during difficult times. One historian of the Western has suggested that

it is entirely possible that in the midst of the confusion and uncertainty created in the Depression and World War II, audiences sustained many of their 'faiths' by identifying with such admirable and powerful symbols of

straightforward righteousness as seen in the “B” Westerns.¹¹

During these years, the B Western acted as a form of morality play for the American public. Good was threatened by evil but was able to triumph in the end. This theme and its positive outcome enhanced the popularity of this subgenre. A further indication of the popularity of the B Western is that literally hundreds of examples of this type of film were made in the 1930s and 1940s when, according to one historian of the Western film, “more Western stars were working simultaneously . . . than in any other period.”¹²

Another element shared by *Oklahoma!* and the B Western appears in its title. Republic Pictures utilized a geographic nomenclature in naming many of its Westerns. Thus we find films with titles like *Idaho*, *Utah*, and *Colorado*. Such usage was probably related to the appeal of regional Americana spurred by the WPA’s guide book series on the states of the nation.

The Musical Western and the Singing Cowboy

Within the genre of the B Western, *Oklahoma!* mirrors a specific subcategory: the musical Western. This was the genre that popularized the phenomenon of the singing cowboy, best exemplified in the career of Gene Autry, who achieved the height of his popularity in the 1930s and early 1940s while working for Herbert Yates’ Republic

¹¹Arthur F. McClure and Ken D. Jones, *Heros, Heavies and Sagebrush: A Pictorial History of the “B” Western Players* (South Brunswick, N.J.: A. J. Barnes & Co., 1972), 11.

¹²Ibid., 12.

Pictures. Although born in Texas, Autry got his big break in Oklahoma where he was working in the early 1930s as a railroad telegrapher. He was discovered by another Oklahoman, Will Rogers, who was impressed by his singing voice. Autry's career rapidly evolved from radio and recordings into motion pictures. His popularity was enhanced in the troubled 1930s by the calm, soothing, and upbeat quality of his voice. Many of his recordings were highly popular hits with the American public. He became the hero of numerous young people who one day would fill the ranks of GIs fighting the battles of World War II or attending productions of *Oklahoma!* in the 1940s.

Autry paved the way for a character like Curly McLain and accustomed audiences to the "naturalness" of the musical Western format. Kalton Lahue has suggested that

To kids in the matinee audiences nothing seemed strange about watching Gene and his horse Champion returning at a leisurely pace after saving the heroine from a runaway wagon, singing his heart out to the accompaniment of the Cass County boys, who were nowhere to be seen.¹³

Film historians have remarked on Autry's effect on his fans, referring to "the special magic that [he] could work on a live audience with his guitar and a few songs."¹⁴ Curly McLain brought a similar aura to songs like "Oh, what a beautiful mornin'" and "People will say we're in love."

The philosophy espoused by Gene Autry that it wasn't a bad world after all and could be made better if everyone stood up for his beliefs is clearly paralleled by the

¹³Kalton C. Lahue, *Riders of the Range: The Sagebrush Heroes of the Sound Screen* (New York: Castle Books, 1973), 33.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

narrative discourse of *Oklahoma!*. This philosophy was appropriate for difficult times--a prescription for a Paradise waiting just over the horizon.

Curly McLain and Gene Autry were not superheroes but, rather, "everyman" types with whom the audience could easily identify. Both sang songs and were respectful of women but could easily dispatch those villains who threatened the community.

Gene Autry published a code of conduct for his young fans that is reminiscent of the American values and ideals present in the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Called the "Ten Commandments of the Cowboy," it was a modern day version of the code of the West:

1. A cowboy never takes unfair advantage--even of an enemy.
2. A cowboy never goes back on his word.
3. A cowboy always tells the truth.
4. A cowboy is kind to children, to elderly people and animals.
5. A cowboy does not possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.
6. A cowboy helps people in distress.
7. A cowboy is a good worker.
8. A cowboy is clean about his person and in thought, word, and deed.
9. A cowboy respects women, parents and his nation's laws.
10. A cowboy is a patriot.¹⁵

In the context of *Oklahoma!*, Curly McLain was a perfect example of the Gene Autry ideal of the cowboy. Jud Fry, in contrast, easily broke commandments 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9 in his dealings with the men and women of the community.

¹⁵Paul Kingsbury, *The Grand Ole Opry History of Country Music: 70 Years of the Songs, the Stars, and the Stories* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995), 44.

During World War II when Gene Autry entered active military service as a transport pilot in the China-Burma-India theater, he was replaced in popularity by Roy Rogers. Rogers had previously appeared in Autry films as a member of the Sons of the Pioneers, the popular Western singing group that would later accompany Rogers in many of his own films. In 1943, the year that *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway, Rogers was described by a *Life* cover story as the “King of the Cowboys.”¹⁶ Like Autry he had a good singing voice and, during Autry’s wartime absence, advanced the musical Western into the 1940s. Significantly, Herbert Yates, his boss at Republic Pictures, had journeyed to New York where he saw a performance of *Oklahoma!*. Upon returning to Hollywood, Yates decided that he wanted to make musical Westerns similar to what he had seen on the Broadway stage. He had been impressed by the relationship between Curly and Laurey. It was this relationship that he wished to duplicate in his musical Westerns starring Roy Rogers. At this point Yates sought for and found a female singer who could play opposite Rogers in a role similar to that of Laurey in the Broadway musical. The female star he found was a big band singer named Dale Evans who would star with Rogers in numerous musical films and eventually marry him. An examination of the Rogers/Evans Westerns demonstrates the influence of Yates’ visit to *Oklahoma!*. The musical numbers in these post-*Oklahoma!* Westerns are often performed on the stage or

¹⁶H. Allen Smith, “King of the Cowboys,” *Life*, 12 July 1943, 54.

in theatrical settings. In the earlier Autry Westerns, in contrast, the musical settings were frequently outdoors around a campfire or on horseback.¹⁷

The singing cowboy became a staple of American popular culture from the 1930s through the 1950s. His appeal resulted in imitation by mainstream musical performers such as Bing Crosby who satirized the genre in the 1936 film *Rhythm on the Range*. Crosby went on to record a number of cowboy songs such as “Deep in the Heart of Texas,” “Don’t Fence Me In,” and “Pistol Packin’ Mama.” All of these cowboy songs were prominent during World War II and were part of the environment of Americanism which would resonate in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical Western.

Country and Western Music

Public interest in these Western-inspired songs was most likely related to the spread of Country and Western music during World War II. The American component of this style of music made it very appropriate for patriotic uses during the war. Many Country and Western artists recorded war-related songs. These included Gene Autry’s “At Mail Call Today,” Ernest Tubb’s “Soldier’s Last Letter,” and Bob Wills’ “Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima.” Elton Britt’s “There’s A Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere” achieved a wide degree of popularity with American audiences at home and overseas. President Franklin Roosevelt was so impressed with the song’s sentiments that he invited Britt to perform it at the White House.

¹⁷For a comparison of pre- and post-*Oklahoma!* Roy Rogers films, see 1942’s *Sons of the Pioneers* and 1944’s *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. The typical Gene Autry style may be seen in *Springtime in the Rockies* (1937) or *Prairie Moon* (1938).

Country and Western music was transformed from a regional “hillbilly” style popular in the South and the West into a national phenomenon by the mobility of soldiers and defense workers from these regions who spread their love of this music to other parts of the country. Ironically, a number of these individuals were Oklahomans who had moved to California during the great Okie Dust Bowl migrations of the 1930s. They provided a ready audience for performers like Gene Autry. Americans also carried this music and its sentiments to battlefields around the globe. This phenomenon is confirmed in a story told by Ernie Pyle, one of the best-known correspondents of World War II. During the battle for the island of Okinawa, a Japanese banzai battalion used an insulting battle cry that linked Country music to other icons of the American nation: “To hell with Roosevelt, to hell with Babe Ruth, to hell with Roy Acuff.” Acuff, “the King of Country Music,” had obviously attained renown on a global scale and stood as an important American icon.¹⁸ Country music historian Bill Malone has indicated that Acuff vied in popularity with Frank Sinatra during the war years. In addition to the professional Country and Western singers who performed for servicemen during the war, a number of amateur Country bands were formed by the servicemen themselves. The music was carried around the world through USO shows and by members of the military’s Special

¹⁸Sheldon Brown, “The Depression and World War II as Seen Through Country Music,” *Social Education* (October 1985): 588.

Services Division. In 1943 (the year *Oklahoma!* opened) there were twenty-five hillbilly bands touring the European Theater of Operations.¹⁹

An examination of the songs of *Oklahoma!* attests to Rodgers and Hammerstein's awareness of American interest in Country and Western music. At least four of the songs in the musical demonstrate connections to the genre. "Oh, what a beautiful mornin'," which opens the production, is reminiscent in style and sentiment of songs popularized on the screen by Gene Autry. Its upbeat, optimistic flavor sets the tone of the musical. In both *Oklahoma!* and the Autry films, we are first introduced to the cowboy hero as he comes into our view singing a lighthearted ballad such as "Beautiful mornin'." In the original stage version of the musical, Curly enters our space on foot, but in the 1955 motion picture Curly arrives singing on horseback in a scenario reminiscent of many of the Autry pictures that preceded it.

The two songs associated with Ado Annie, "I cain't say no" and "All er nothin'," also demonstrate a link to another type of Country and Western music popular at the time. Both songs are examples of the comedic hillbilly-style created by female Country stars such as Judy Canova. The Florida-born Canova got her start in 1930s New York City as part of a trio of singing siblings who billed themselves as The Three Georgia Crackers. They played New York nightclubs as a novelty act specializing in hillbilly gags, dances, and songs. They became great favorites of Manhattan audiences and paved the way for other Country and hillbilly acts to follow. Canova created a cornpone hillbilly

¹⁹Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1985),

character that delighted sophisticated New York audiences with her portrayal of a typical “hick from the sticks.” She became popular on radio, in the movies, and on recordings. She produced a series of successful hillbilly films for Republic Pictures, the studio of singing cowboys Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. In 1939 she played on Broadway opposite Buddy Ebsen and Phil Silvers in the comic show *Yokel Boy*. Canova’s antics and musical numbers provide an interesting precedent for the character and songs of *Oklahoma!*’s Ado Annie. The titles of her songs illustrate the connection between them: “I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again,” “I’ve Been Hoo-Dooed,” and “Don’t Let My Mother Know.” A sampling of lyrics from Ado Annie’s “I Cain’t Say No” demonstrates the Canova-like hillbilly flavor of the song:

I’m just a girl who cain’t say no,
 I’m in a turrible fix.
 I always say, come on, le’s go--
 Jis when I orta say nix!
 When a person tries to kiss a girl
 I know she orta give his face a smack.
 But as soon as someone kisses me
 I somehow sorta wanta kiss him back!
 I’m jist a fool when lights are low.
 I cain’t be prissy and quaint--
 I ain’t the type thet c’n faint--
 How c’n I be whut I ain’t?
 I cain’t say no!²⁰

“All er nothin’,” a duet about faithfulness sung by Annie and Will Parker, attempts to resolve the issues raised by the previous song in a similar “hillbilly/yokel” style. The use

²⁰Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 21; Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), 121-123.

of the hillbilly style by Rodgers and Hammerstein was in keeping with a broader discourse about these rural folks in the sophisticated urban media of the 1940s. In the 1930s and 40s, Paul Webb's hillbilly cartoons appeared in *Esquire* as well as in books. Another hillbilly was also popularized during the war by "Lil' Abner," the comic strip created by Al Capp as a social and political commentary on the contemporary United States. The hillbillies made their way to the frontlines of World War II through the decorations covering the fuselages and noses of American warplanes. There were numerous examples of the hillbilly characters on the planes derived from the Webb cartoons, "Lil Abner," and the character Snuffy Smith from the comic strip "Barney Google." Fascination with these characters may be related to the fact that many military pilots came from the southern and western regions of the nation.

In October 1943, *Time* magazine included an article outlining the impact of the hillbilly phenomenon on the nation:

The dominant popular music of the U.S. today is hillbilly. By last week the flood of camp-meetin' melody, which had been rising steadily in juke joints and on radio programs for over a year, was swamping Tin Pan Alley. . . . All over the country were the Appalachian accents of the geetar and the country fiddle. All this constituted the biggest revolution in U.S. popular musical taste since the 'swing' craze began in the middle 30s. Public demand was shifting from Afro-American stomps and blues to a much simpler (and often monotonous) musical idiom that was old when nostalgic '49ers were singing 'Clementine.'²¹

²¹Bull Market in Corn," *Time*, 4 October 1943, 49.

Another more serious mode of Country and Western music also appears in *Oklahoma!*. This is the character-defining song sung by Jud in Scene II of Act One after Curly has visited him in the smokehouse. Jud is now talking with Ali Hakim, the peddler who has been trying to sell him erotic postcards to decorate the walls of his dingy living quarters. Entitled “Lonely Room,” the song helps to account for some of Jud’s abberant behavior and does motivate a degree of sympathy in the audience:

The floor creaks,
The door squeaks,
There’s a mouse a-nibblin’ on a broom,
And I set by myself
Like a cobweb on a shelf,
By myself in a lonely room.

The next verses outline his daydream fantasies about Laurey whom he desperately wants for his bride. These are followed by images of his aching solitude:

The floor creaks,
The door squeaks,
And the mouse starts a-nibblin’ on the broom.
And the sun flicks my eyes--
It was all a pack o’lies!
I’m awake in a lonely room. . . .²²

The song is performed as an operatic aria rather than in Country and Western style, but the content is of the latter. Cecelia Tichi demonstrated that the theme of loneliness has been a dominant theme in the history of Country and Western music and in American culture in general. Tichi describes a “loneliness endemic to the vast environment and to

²²Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 47-48.

human figures in transit.”²³ This feeling of loneliness which Jud describes in his song accounts for the “desolation that pervades many of the songs on the subject.”²⁴

Tichi describes the impact of the vast spaces of the North American continent on its population. As an example, she quotes Washington Irving’s account of his visit to the Oklahoma prairies in the 1830s. Irving characterized Oklahoma as “an immense extent of landscape without a sign of human existence” and his overall conclusion was that it was “inexpressibly lonely.”²⁵ By 1900, the era portrayed in *Oklahoma!*, much of this physical loneliness had been transformed as a result of the influx of population during the Oklahoma land rushes of the 1880s. However, the psychological loneliness remained.

Jud toils on a productive farm. His employer prospers; Jud exists. The family resides in a homey farmhouse; Jud dwells alone in an isolated shed. The poignant contrast is significant. Tichi suggests that a component of American loneliness is the lack of family ties characteristic of an historically mobile nation. She cites an example from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. At the end of the novel Huck approaches the household of Tom Sawyer’s aunt:

Within minutes, Huck hears the hum and ‘wail’ of a spinning wheel, the signature sound of a family and household of which he has never been a part. ‘And then I

²³Cecelia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 101.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 98.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 90.

knowned for certain I wished I was dead--for that is the lonesomest sound in the world."²⁶

Before Jud sings "Lonely Room" he says to Ali Hakim:

Don't want nothin' from no peddler. Want real things!
Whut am I doin' shet up here--like that feller [Curly] says--
a-crawlin' and a -festerin'? Whut am I doin in this lousy
smokehouse?²⁷

Jud's only "family" are the spiders and vermin with whom he shares his "dwelling."

The aching loneliness of Country and Western music would reach a new level of expression and popularity in the latter half of the 1940s in the hands of Hank Williams for whom male sexual loneliness became a signature theme. Jud's expression of loneliness and frustration was a prophetic glimpse of the mood and content of this postwar music.

The Western Musical

In addition to its association with the musical Western, *Oklahoma!* must also be considered in the context of the Western musical. The Western musical was a musical drama utilizing a Western plot or theme. Examples might be found both on the Broadway stage and in the Hollywood cinema. Sometimes the same work appeared in both formats, as with Rudolph Friml's *Rose Marie* (stage 1925, film 1936) for which Oscar Hammerstein II provided the lyrics. Hammerstein was also involved with two other Western musicals. These were the Broadway production of *Rainbow* (1928) about

²⁶Ibid., 99.

²⁷Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 47.

the California gold rush of 1849 (made into a film in 1930 as *Song of the West*) and the film musical *High, Wide, and Handsome* (1937) about farmer-oilmen on the Pennsylvania “frontier” of the 1850s. Like *Oklahoma!*, the latter musical deals with the economic development of the region and expansion of the frontier under the aegis of capitalist investment.

The use of the Western musical for patriotic purposes was clearly articulated in the 1939 film *Let Freedom Ring* starring Nelson Eddy. This musical told the story of the defense of democratic liberties on the western frontier. The film’s introductory title cards summarize its patriotic agenda against a background of musical Americana:

The greatest battles for liberty and human rights are not fought on the battlefields of history but in the hearts of a nation’s people. This is a tale of the days when the new West refought without guns or banners the eternal struggle against oppression--and won for another generation the gift of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.²⁸

Oklahoma! represented a similar but more subtle form of wartime patriotism. The popularity of the stage show inspired other Western musicals during the war, notably two films starring Judy Garland: *Girl Crazy* (1943) and *The Harvey Girls* (1945).

Western Musical Americanism

Oklahoma! related to musical Americanism, another manifestation of popular interest in the West. This form of Americana produced a number of symphonic and dance-related compositions. For example, in 1942 Sophie Maslow, a member of the

²⁸*Let Freedom Ring*, VHS 1 hr. 40 min., MGM/UA, M204611, videocassette.

original Martha Graham Dance Company, produced *Folksay* which utilized traditional American ballads such as “On Top of Old Smokey” and “Sweet Betsy from Pike.” Oklahoma folksinger Woody Guthrie performed at the premiere. Barbara Zuck noted that “The American West had a particular mystique for American composers in this period. Pieces portraying western life, often quoting cowboy tunes, were especially popular.”²⁹ Among the best known examples of this genre were Virgil Thomson’s score for Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), a documentary about the Dust Bowl and Aaron Copland’s two Western-inspired ballets, *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942). It is significant that Rodgers and Hammerstein attended the opening night of *Rodeo* which featured the choreography of Agnes DeMille. Her original handling of the dances for this Western-themed ballet was an important factor in her selection by Rodgers and Hammerstein to create the dance numbers for *Oklahoma!*.

The Western, the musical B Western, Country and Western music, the Western musical, and Western musical Americanism were all important ways of defining American identity in the 1940s. As important components of *Oklahoma!*, they helped that musical serve as a carrier of a frontier ideology to the American public of that decade and beyond.

²⁹Barbara A. Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1980), 149.

Americanism Abroad

If the cowboy was the icon of American identity at home, then his military counterpart, the soldier, helped to spread that identity abroad, especially in times of war as in the first half of the 1940s. If *Oklahoma!* was about patriotic Americana on the home front, then *South Pacific* charted American influence abroad in the form of Americanism. In this context Americanism refers to chauvinistic nationalism, a long-held belief in American exceptionalism that the United States and the American experience were distinct. Central to such a point of view was the idea that America should serve as a model or paradigm for other nations and peoples. Henry Luce had hinted at these ideas in his 1941 essay "The American Century."

Americanism can manifest itself in a negative form, characterized by the ethnocentric belief that one's own nation or culture is superior to all others. It may also be associated with various forms of racism or cultural imperialism. The latter refers to the impact of an external culture on a local one in which the external dominates and may ultimately replace the local one. *South Pacific* demonstrates many of these elements of Americanism. Produced in the postwar/Cold war era when American global hegemony was already in place, it was a retrospective glance at the wartime experiences of Americans in the first half of the decade.

At the height of World War II (roughly contemporary with the staging of *Oklahoma!* back in the States), U.S. Marines, sailors, Seabees, and nurses stationed on an island of the French New Hebrides are representative of Americans. Three characters in *South Pacific* represent the American abroad. They are Ensign Nellie Forbush, Lt.

Joseph Cable, and Seabee Luther Billis. Each comes from a different background and represents various aspects of Americanism overseas.

Nellie Forbush is the American innocent abroad. A Navy nurse from Little Rock, Arkansas, she is a self-proclaimed “hick from the sticks.” Interestingly, she is, in this respect, quite like the people who comprised the audiences of musical B Westerns in the 1930s. An article on Gene Autry in an issue of *Photoplay* suggested that the singing cowboy star struck a responsive chord in country people.³⁰

In relationship to *Oklahoma!*, there is striking kinship to Nellie’s rustic roots. Arkansas and Oklahoma are neighboring states. During the Great Depression the dispossessed “Arkie” was as prevalent as the “Okie.” Both groups headed West during these years in search of a rekindled American Dream in the state of California. The common bond between the “Arkie” and the “Okie” was suggested by Woody Guthrie in his Depression-era ballad “You Okies and Arkies,” which portrays the conditions in the labor camps of the era.

From a rural home in Arkansas to a wartime assignment in the South Pacific is a big step for a country girl. When Nellie develops a romantic interest in the French planter Emile de Becque, there is no disguising her American naiveté. The cosmopolitan de Becque is a cultured gentleman from France; Nellie is an uncomplicated young woman from Arkansas. Emile reads Marcel Proust; Nellie delights in Dinah

³⁰Kirtley Baskette, “Payboy of the Western World,” reprinted in *The Talkies: Articles and Illustrations from Photoplay Magazine, 1938-1940*, ed. Richard Griffith (New York: Dover Publications, 1971).

Shore. Shore's popularity as an American singer rose during the war years when she became a favorite of American GIs. To those Americans far from home she was a symbol of what they had left behind. Dinah Shore and *Oklahoma!* were both as American as apple pie. Significantly, Shore's repertoire in the 1940s included recordings of the popular songs of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

When we first meet Nellie, Emile is giving her a tour of his island plantation after the two have just lunched together. Her dialog sums up the nature of the Innocent

Abroad:

Well, I'm just speechless! . . . And that lunch! Wild chicken -- I didn't know it was ever wild. Gosh I had no idea that people lived like this right out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.³¹

Not only do the remarks reveal her genuine innocence, her simplicity, her naiveté, but they poignantly demonstrate an ethnocentric point of view. Is it possible for civilization and culture to exist out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? Like that of many young Americans who were sent to the Pacific during the war, Nellie's image of the South Seas was most likely the product of the popular culture of adventure stories and the Hollywood cinema. Nellie's eyes, like those of her countrymen, were to be opened by participation in a global war.

Luther Billis, the unofficial leader of the Seabees on the island, is the definitive American opportunist. A born wheeler-dealer, he continually searches for new and expedient ways to make a buck. Everyone that he comes in contact with is a potential

³¹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 274.

customer (read “patsy”), whether officer, enlisted man, or native islander. The underside of Americanism abroad is defined by his relationship with the Tonkinese peddler Bloody Mary. Mary had worked on one of the island’s French plantations, but through intelligence and initiative she managed to establish a business selling souvenirs to the Americans stationed on the island. Mary became independent. The conflict between her business interests and those of Luther Billis provides some of the musical’s comedic highlights. Definitely the equal of Billis, she outsmarts him on a number of occasions.

Billis hangs out with a motley group of sailors, Seabees, and Marines who have adopted Bloody Mary as a kind of pet to relieve their boredom. She is frequently the object of their derision. In the company of Billis and his buddies she becomes an example of the underside of Americanism. Under the guidance of the sailors and Marines, she undergoes a process of Americanization of the most negative kind. Her costume is a combination of Tonkinese traditional dress and American military castoffs. She sports a Marine Corps olive drab shirt and a set of dogtags. Taught by the soldiers to swear like a Marine drill instructor, Mary peppers her language with American profanity which she obviously doesn’t understand. Bloody Mary is introduced through the song “Bloody Mary is the girl I love.” The song includes references to American popular culture that are used to characterize her. For instance, her skin is described “as tender as Dimaggio’s glove,”³² a reference to baseball great Joe Dimaggio whose star was rising with the New York Yankees during the 1940s.

³²Ibid., 282.

Bloody Mary chews betel nuts but she “don’t use Pepsodent,” a popular American brand of toothpaste.³³ The descriptive nickname “Bloody” derived from Mary’s habitual chewing of the nuts, a customary Tonkinese habit. Red juices from the nuts have turned her teeth and lips a red color the Americans consider grotesque. Like most of the other women of color on the island, she goes by the name of Mary. It is her blood-red mouth that differentiates her from the other women. Bloody Mary’s treatment by the Marines and what she became under their tutelage are prime examples of American cultural imperialism. Indigenous cultures are transformed by dominant external powers, in this case the United States. The definition of the “other” or the foreign through examples of American popular culture such as a famous baseball player or brand of toothpaste demonstrates a process of commodification commensurate with the power of cultural imperialism.

In this environment of commodification of the “other,” Billis exemplifies the American super salesman relating to various peoples living on the island, whether nurses, Tonkinese peddlers, or “cannibals” participating in the boar’s tooth ritual. The economic dimension of Billis’s character will be discussed in the chapter on socioeconomics.

A third example of the American character abroad is portrayed through Lt. Joseph Cable, son of a wealthy mainline Philadelphia family. Both his father and grandfather are part of a distinguished law firm which the young Princeton graduate is

³³Ibid., 283.

expected to join after completing his military service. Back in the States he had left a fiancé whom he plans to marry after the War.

Like many young American males sent to the Pacific he is drawn to the exotic beauty of the local women. Bloody Mary, who describes Cable as a “damn sexy man,” sees the young Lieutenant as a rich husband for her 17-year old daughter Liat. Mary also thinks that by offering the beautiful young woman to the American officer, she might procure the military support she needs to keep her souvenir business in operation despite official threats to close her down.

On the exotic island of Bali Ha'i, a veritable paradise in the middle of a war zone, Mary introduces Cable to Liat. In the ensuing relationship with the Asian Liat, Cable follows a pattern represented by Giacomo Puccini in his opera *Madame Butterfly*. In that opera, a nineteenth century American naval officer named Pinkerton has a love affair with a Japanese woman (the Butterfly of the title), fathers her child, and then abandons her. Years later he returns with his American wife to claim the child as his own.

Despite the fact that Cable has a fiancé back home in the States, he enters into an intimate relationship with the young Tonkinese girl. As a token of his love for her, he gives Liat a gold pocket watch, a family heirloom passed down through the generations. Mary views this gift as a symbol of the young Marine's intent and offers Liat to him as a bride. Realizing that he could never bring this Asian woman back to Philadelphia as his bride, Cable abruptly breaks off the relationship. Mary is so enraged she smashes the watch he had given Liat.

Cable's failure to live up to his commitment to Liat illustrates a negative form of global Americanism, a form that would characterize the postwar years. It is significant that Cable is a soldier, for his rejection of marriage and abandonment of Liat resonate with America's subsequent actions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war. Cable and his nation might offer their "love" and protection to the peoples of the Pacific Rim, but in the end would abandon both woman and nation.

The American Century

This chapter began with a reference to Henry Luce's *Life* essay of 1941, "The American Century," which described America's coming hegemonic role in the postwar world. Robert Herzstein's analysis of the philosophy behind Luce's "American Century" provides an interesting parallel to the concerns of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* previously described:

To Henry Luce, the American frontier now encompassed the world, one which hungered for food and hope and American know-how. He advocated the dispatch of American technicians, engineers, doctors, and road builders to foreign lands.³⁴

In January 1941, a month before "The American Century" appeared in *Life*, Luce delivered several speeches in the American West that foreshadowed the argument of the essay. On January 9, 1941 in Pasadena, California he called upon Americans to feed the hungry people of the world by "unleashing the untapped productive capacity of the

³⁴Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce: A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 178.

American farmer."³⁵ It was this American capacity for abundance that was summed up in the finale to *Oklahoma!*:

Brand-new state
Gonna treat you great!
Gonna give you barley
Carrots and pertaters--
Pasture for the cattle--
Spinach and termayters! ³⁶

Two days after his appearance in California, Luce spoke in Tulsa, Oklahoma where he told his audience that

we can no longer escape the burden of our own destiny. . . .
Ours is the power, ours is the opportunity and ours will be
the responsibility whether we like it or not. ³⁷

Luce's recommendation that America should dispatch its medical personnel and roadbuilders abroad materialized during the war. Military doctors and nurses (e.g., Nellie Forbush) and Construction Battalions (like Billis and his Seabee comrades) made their way overseas spreading American values as well as know-how to the peoples of the world.

In 1947, two years before *South Pacific* opened on Broadway, Luce again outlined his view of America's global mission:

³⁵Ibid., 178.

³⁶Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 75-76.

³⁷Herzstein, *Luce*, 178.

Go over the earth, as investors and managers and engineers,
as makers of mutual prosperity, as missionaries of
capitalism and democracy. . . .³⁸

Here was a signal to Americans to shape a new political and economic order on a global scale. Two years later, *South Pacific* would provide an analysis of that global mission.

John Wayne and the Cowboy/ Soldier

In defining American identity in the 1940s, the two musicals moved from the nationalistic Americana of *Oklahoma!* to the global Americanism of *South Pacific*. In each musical a generic character acted as an icon for America: the cowboy in *Oklahoma!* and the soldier in *South Pacific*.

The cowboy and the soldier were appropriate representatives of America in the “wartime” climate that extended from the midpoint of World War II (1943) through the early years of the Cold War (1949). At the same time as the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein were enjoying their popularity on the New York stage, another icon of American popular culture, motion picture star John Wayne, conflated the cowboy and soldier in his contemporary film roles. Wayne, like the creations of Rodgers and Hammerstein, became a symbol of America at home and abroad.

John Wayne’s movie career began in the 1930s when he was featured in a series of B Westerns, including one unsuccessful try as a singing cowboy. He became a star in

³⁸Stephen Brier, ed., *Who Built America: Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol.2, *From the Gilded Age to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 487.

1939, however, when director John Ford cast him as the lead in *Stagecoach* which established the pattern for the classic Western film of the next decade.

During the 1940s, Wayne alternated between the roles of the cowboy and the soldier. In his films of the decade, he could be found tracking down cattle rustlers on the Western frontier or landing on the beaches of a Japanese-held island in the Pacific. In the late 1940s the cowboy and the soldier blended in the series of cavalry films that Wayne made for John Ford: *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950). Although set in the American West during the Indian wars of the post-Civil War period, these films have been described by Richard Slotkin as Cold War Westerns that mirrored contemporary world history.³⁹ The American cavalry of the Western frontier protected American families from the “savage” threat of the Indians. In the 1940s, the American military, stationed on the Pacific frontier, provided a defensive wall for postwar Americans frightened by the spread of a “savage” Asian Communism.

In 1949 *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, starring John Wayne, was playing in theaters at the same time *South Pacific* was running on Broadway. Wayne’s Marine Sgt. John Stryker shared a fate similar to that of Lt. Joseph Cable: both men were gunned down by bullets fired by Japanese snipers on islands in the Pacific. Stryker and Cable provided examples of American bravery at a time when new threats appeared on the international horizon: the detonation of the first Soviet atomic bomb and the Communist victory in

³⁹Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

China. Apprehensive Americans eagerly embraced the heroic Americanism of film and musical.

CHAPTER 2

A CONSUMER'S PARADISE: FROM SURREYS TO GRASS SKIRTS

Introduction

An important component of the American Paradise is its socioeconomic discourse. Socioeconomics refers to the interrelation that exists between economics and social behavior. Socioeconomic patterns are influenced by the historic period of which they are a part. In *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* these patterns are characteristic of the age of affluence centering around the 1940s, especially in the postwar period.

It is commonly agreed that World War II, rather than the New Deal, was responsible for ending the economic depression of the 1930s. Wartime productivity and high level employment helped reverse the economy and set the stage for postwar prosperity. During the war, the United States acted as the “arsenal of democracy,” providing ships, tanks, and planes not only for its own armed forces but for Britain and the Soviet Union as well as other Allies. Nineteen hundred and forty three (the year *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway) was a pivotal year in America’s journey toward a society of abundance and consumption. By that year the unemployment rate had fallen to 1.9 percent.

Americans in the early years of the postwar era were buoyed by the optimistic view that the nation was at last on the road to utopia (interestingly, the title of a 1945 film starring Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, and Dorothy Lamour). Their confidence was enhanced

by the knowledge that they had overcome the crises of the Great Depression and the century's Second World War.

The realization of the American Dream seemed to be at hand. The economic boom in the second half of the 1940s and its accompanying prosperity led Americans to believe in continued economic growth and the possibility of a limitless future. The goal of American postwar society became the creation of expanding prosperity both at home and abroad. Improving the human condition in both domestic and foreign contexts became a central tenet of liberal policy in the postwar years.

The faith in a growing prosperity encouraged the nation's leaders to believe that they could solve national problems of poverty, crime, and racial and social injustice by expanding the economic opportunity for the nation's citizens. Abroad it was felt that America's prosperity would bolster the nation's image as a democratic role model and halt the advance of Communism, the *bête noire* of the Cold War era. This missionary impulse of spreading the American way of life abroad followed the blueprint laid out in Henry Luce's 1941 "American Century" essay. The linked elements of democracy and free enterprise were meant to provide a bulwark against the spread of Communism in strategic Third World regions such as Latin America, Africa, and especially Asia. Postwar foreign policy was based upon a belief in the power of prosperity to win the world to the American cause. This 1940s version of the American Dream (in its domestic and global versions) was an important element of the narrative discourse in both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*.

Oklahoma, Modernity and the Western Economic Boom

The economic discourse of both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* aimed at the present and the future, although both musicals deal with the subject of past American history: the turn-of-the-century American West and World War II in the Pacific. At first glance, the cowboy subject matter of *Oklahoma!* suggests a nostalgic visit to an American past having little to do with current concerns. This was not the case, however, for the West would assume increasing importance for the future of the nation in the 1940s, building on a past that already indicated the region's importance to the modernizing and expanding economy of the nation.

The image of the West as a backward and pristine region in the nineteenth century is, according to historian Patricia Limerick, an erroneous myth.¹ Rather, the region was one in which the traditional and the modern coexisted. There were cowboys on horseback roping steers that were then transported by train to markets in the Midwest and East. The machine, especially the railroad, played an important role in the transformation of the region.

It was the railroad train that transported *Oklahoma!*'s Will Parker to and from Kansas City, where he won fifty dollars in a roping contest at a weekend fair. Upon his return to Oklahoma, he regales his friends with a musical description of the sights he has seen in the big city. Will, like Nellie in *South Pacific*, is a "hick from the sticks" who is bowled over by his new experiences. Until he arrived in the city, he "didn't have an idy

¹Patricia N. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987).

of whut the modern world was comin' to!"² His song "Kansas City" is a veritable catalog of the modernity he sees on his trip. In three stanzas he describes the spectacle of Kansas City where "ev'rythin's like a dream" and "better than a magic-lantern show!" There Will has counted twenty-seven gas-driven automobiles, used a Bell telephone and spoken to an operator, seen a skyscraper seven stories high, and stayed in a hotel with central heating and indoor plumbing.

At the conclusion of his song, Will demonstrates two of the new dance steps he has picked up on his visit. First, he does a "two-step" which he assures his friends has replaced the waltz. Of his second demonstration he says, "That's rag-time. Seen a couple of colored fellows doin' it."³ Ragtime, one of the musical predecessors of jazz, may be seen as another symbol of Kansas City's modernity and the penetration of the modern into Oklahoma Territory and the West. Ragtime is characterized by syncopation, a rhythmic pattern suggesting an urban and mechanical world. Kansas City was the home of African American ragtime composer James Scott, and in 1899 (one year prior to the setting of *Oklahoma!*) Scott Joplin's (*The King of Ragtime*) "Original Rags" was published in the city. In the subsequent history of American jazz in the West, important links would be formed between the "Kansas City style" and the development of jazz in Oklahoma.

²Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 15.

³Ibid., 16.

The encroaching modernity celebrated in “Kansas City” is further represented in Curly’s speech to Laurey near the end of Scene 2 of Act II after she has agreed to marry him:

Oh, things is changin’ right and left! Buy up mowin’ machines, cut down the prairies! Shoe yer horses, drag them plows under the sod ! They gonna make a state outa this, they gonna put it in the union! Country a changin’, got to change with it!⁴

James Naremore has suggested that the nostalgic turn-of-the-century characters of *Oklahoma!* are living on the verge of modernity:

Although they inhabit quaintly simple times, they have left behind an old world (represented by the overpopulated East) and brought progress to the plains. Above all, they represent the power of capitalism to remake the land; and because they are closely associated with the frontier earth, they make commodification and industry seem as natural as the seasons.⁵

Both the West portrayed in *Oklahoma!* and the West of the 1940s were undergoing important transformations. In the musical, Indian Territory was on the verge of statehood. The new West of the 1940s was epitomized by what happened to Oklahoma during the war years:

The Oklahoma of 1942 bore little resemblance, whatever the rhetoric, to the state of a generation earlier. Dugouts, Indian teepees, prairie schooners, and land runs were all memories of a distant past. The boisterous oil boomtowns of the 1920s were now settled communities where men held

⁴Ibid., 71.

⁵James Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 71.

steady jobs and raised God-fearing families. Munitions factories and military airfields dotted the prairies. Royal Air Force fliers trained near Ponca City for the attack on Berlin. And columns of heavy army vehicles thundered along highways once crowded with Okies in pursuit of the California dream. About half of all Oklahomans still farmed in 1942, but machinery, the radio, electrification and news of the world had changed their lives. The exodus to urban centers such as Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Muskogee, Lawton, Enid, and Bartlesville continued and would clearly change the state.⁶

World War II brought new prosperity to Oklahoma that helped to erase the memories of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era. A demand for American goods led to rising prices and a higher percent of employment for the state. Oklahoma became important in the production of war materials such as petroleum, coal, lead, zinc, cotton, and a variety of food supplies. The finale of *Oklahoma!*, which enumerates the state's agricultural riches like some musical cornucopia, tips its hat to the resources and productivity of this region and the American West in general.

In *Oklahoma!* the bounty of nature--the region's corn, wheat, and potatoes--is going to be what makes eventual statehood possible (along with rich oilfields not mentioned in the musical). This statehood will link Oklahoma to the larger national and global capitalist network. In 1942, a year prior to the opening of *Oklahoma!*, the University of Oklahoma Press published Grant Foreman's *A History of Oklahoma* which provides interesting statistical information about the Oklahoma of 1900. Taxable property was valued at fifty million dollars. Yearly agricultural output included sixty million

⁶H. Wayne Morgan, *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), 133.

bushels of corn, twenty-five million bushels of wheat, twelve million bushels of oats, one hundred and fifty thousand bales of cotton and one and a half million head of livestock, including over nine hundred thousand cattle. Commerce was both national and international. Oklahoma flour (produced by forty-three mills) was shipped nationwide and to Liverpool, England, South America, and Japan. Oklahoma cedar logs were sent to Germany where they were made into pencils. Wheat and corn were supplied to India and cotton to England and Japan. Horses and mules were shipped to Cape Town, South Africa.

Seen in this context, the Dust Bowl experience of the Okies of the 1930s would seem to be an aberration within a history of capitalist expansion. The economy of Oklahoma, like the rest of the nation, took off in the 1940s as a result of wartime demand and production. The economic optimism expressed by *Oklahoma!* would have resonated easily with the feelings of Broadway audiences flush with money earned from wartime wages. Like Curly and Laurey, numerous American couples looked forward to a future characterized by prosperity and abundance.

This mood is best captured in “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” sung by Curly in the first act of the musical. The purpose of the song is to convince Laurey to accompany Curly to the upcoming box social. The first part of the song is a detailed catalog of the surrey and its features. It is pulled by a “team of snow-white horses” and is the slickest gig you [sic] ever see.” It has yellow wheels, brown upholstery and a dashboard of “genuine leather.” There are isinglass curtains to protect against the rain and two bright side lights for nighttime use. During World War II, when automobile

manufacture had been curtailed and replaced by tank and aircraft production, Curly's surrey must have conjured up visions of postwar automobile purchases among those attending the musical. Such detailed and varied types of features on a vehicle became strong selling points in the competitive postwar automobile marketplace. Automobile styling in the hands of designers like Harley Earl (creator of the tailfin) was a distinguishing feature of the postwar consumer economy.

Consumerism

Curly's desire to rent or purchase such a fancy vehicle is characteristic of a consumerist point of view that was developing in America at the turn of the century. According to historian Jackson Lears, consumerism represented a "therapeutic ethos" that appeared in America in the 1880s. This ethos developed in response to specific historical forces: an urban-industrial transformation of the nation, rapid technological change, the spread of an interdependent national market economy, the coming of mass society and the loss of individuality and personal autonomy, and society dominated by bureaucratic corporations. Lears suggests that the consumer culture of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries provided a form of therapy for Americans undergoing these historic changes. Americans had new emotional needs to be met. The therapeutic ethos "promised to heal wounds inflicted by rationalization and to release the cramped energies of a fretful

bourgeoisie.”⁷ The emerging consumer culture was a way of responding to Americans’ “longings for reintegrated selfhood and intense experience.”⁸

The America of World War II helped to generate an increased hunger for consumer products and a concomitant support for the therapeutic ethos which appeared in wartime advertisements promising Americans a postwar future filled with all kinds of new products and gadgets that would make their lives better than ever. In the previous decade, the economic crisis had reduced the demand for consumer goods. During the war these products were put on hold while manufacturers retooled to produce war-related material. The resulting scarcity of consumer goods, combined with the high wages earned by wartime workers, created a substantial demand in the immediate postwar years. This demand produced the economic boom of these years and the nation’s optimistic faith in prosperity. It also helped to allay fears of a return to Depression era economic conditions after the end of the war.

This new emphasis upon consumption is evident in a number of examples from the musicals beyond those previously discussed. Both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* feature characters who are salesmen. In *Oklahoma!* it is the peddler Ali Hakim, and in *South Pacific* it is Seabee/wheeler-dealer Luther Billis. An examination of the economic

⁷Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History*, ed. Richard W. Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 17.

⁸Ibid.

relationships in both musicals indicates the importance of these characters and the way in which they link the various members of each community.

Ali Hakim is described as a Persian peddler. In Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs*, he was a Syrian.⁹ The character was derived from an earlier Riggs play entitled *Knives from Syria* (1925) about a Syrian peddler in 1920s Oklahoma who wishes to marry the daughter of one of his regular customers. Rodgers and Hammerstein may have decided to transform Ali Hakim into a Persian as a result of American interest in that country during World War II. Persia (Iran) was an important source of oil for the war effort and acted as the "pipeline" for the transport of American-made war materials to the Soviet Union. Consequently, a number of American transportation units were stationed there during the war to help get these goods into the hands of the Russians and improve harbor, highway, and railroad facilities in the country. American wartime audiences would have been familiar with these efforts from articles appearing in popular magazines. In its August 1943 issue, *National Geographic* included an article entitled "Iran in Wartime: Through Fabulous Persia, Hub of the Middle East, Americans, Britons, and Iranians Keep Sinews of War Moving to the Embattled Soviet Union."¹⁰

⁹According to the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, by 1900 Syrian peddlers were prevalent throughout the United States, including the American West. *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1980), pp.130-131.

¹⁰John N. Greely, "Iran in Wartime: Through Fabulous Persia, Hub of the Middle East, Americans, Britons, and Iranians Keep Sinews of War Moving to the Embattled Soviet Union," *National Geographic*, August 1943, 129-156.

The character of Ali Hakim serves as a marker of the West's economic development. In that respect he is similar to the character of Sol Levy in the 1931 film of Edna Ferber's novel *Cimarron*. In that film, which traces the history of Oklahoma from the later part of the nineteenth century until 1930, we first see Levy as a peddler with a pack mule ("a walking notion counter") selling needles, lace, thread and other commodities to the townspeople. As Oklahoma evolves, so, too, does Levy's business. He is seen in 1893 with a horse and wagon. In 1898 he is the owner of Levy's Mercantile Co. By 1907, the year that Oklahoma becomes a state, he owns a large department store. Ali Hakim also undergoes a rapid transformation in the musical. We first meet him with a horse and wagon carrying the wares that he wishes to sell to the farmers and cowboys. At this point in the story, he is characterized by his mobility. He describes himself as a "poor gypsy" always on "the open road."¹¹ He tells Andrew Carnes (who believes Ali may have compromised his daughter Ado Annie and therefore should marry her) that: "I'm a peddler. A peddler travels up and down and all around and you'd hardly ever see your daughter no more."¹² All that is changed by the end of the play, however, when he marries the flirtatious Gertie Cummings who forces Ali to settle down and "run [her] Papa's store."¹³

¹¹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 74.

¹²Ibid., 32.

¹³Ibid., 78.

Ali Hakim may be seen as a symbol of modernity on the Oklahoma frontier and the incorporation of the West into the national network of capital. The peddler or drummer served as a link to the big cities of Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City and their large mercantile houses. They brought with them the latest in fashions and labor saving devices helping to spread modernity and the ethos of consumption to the nation's rural regions. Among Ali's best customers are the women of the community. Women were to play a major role in the emerging consumer society, both at the turn of the century and in the postwar 1940s. Ali visits the rural farms of women like Aunt Eller, selling them kitchen utensils such as eggbeaters and imported undergarments. His arrival is eagerly awaited by the local population anxious to examine his latest offerings. The people who are his customers and who are representative of Oklahoma Indian Territory at the time are proto-consumers, a group with whom 1940s audiences could easily identify.

Characteristic of an age of consumption and affluence, Ali is also a seller of dreams. He discovers in Laurey Williams a romantic young woman who has trouble making up her mind about the men in her life. He therefore sells her a "magic elixir" which he claims will aid in her decision-making process. He claims that it is made from secret ingredients going back to the age of the Egyptian pharaohs. Here we have a good example of the "therapeutic ethos" of consumerism at work.

The economic relationships represented by *Oklahoma!* not only portray women as consumers but also as the objects of consumption. In the development of the West where women were often scarce it was not unusual for them to take on the identity of commodities such as prostitutes at the local dance halls or mail-order brides who helped

to settle and populate the frontier. In *Oklahoma!* Curly McLain, Ali Hakim, Will Parker, and Jud Fry (Aunt Eller's surly and lascivious farmhand) all participate in the economy of women. The economic traffic in women in the musical operated at several different levels. First, there was the box social which was the impetus for the plot and love story of *Oklahoma!*. In preparation for this event, the single women of the community prepared box lunches. These lunches were then put up for auction. The winning bidder for each not only got the lunch but also the company of the young woman who prepared it. This led to the fierce rivalry between Curly and Jud at the auction, since both wanted Laurey's company at the picnic. Curly's desire for Laurey was so intense that he was willing to bid his most prized possessions and the tools of his trade: his saddle, horse, and sixgun.

There is a more sinister element that may be found at the heart of this traffic in women in *Oklahoma!*. This is represented by the pornographic material collected by Jud Fry. His character is associated with a dark and ominous sexuality symbolized by the pinups of nude women that decorate the walls of his smokehouse living quarters. Jud's pinup environment and his desire are captured in the song that he sings, "Lonely Room":

A dream starts a-dancin' in my head.
 And all the things that I wish fer
 Turn out like I want them to be,
 And I'm better'n that smart-alleck cowhand
 Who thinks he is better' n me,
 And the girl that I want
 Ain't afraid of my arms,
 And her own soft arms keep me warm.
 And her long, yeller hair

Falls across my face
 Jist like the rain in a storm.¹⁴

The element of loneliness in Jud's song and its relationship to the subject matter of Country and Western music has already been discussed in the preceding chapter. Philip Slater, in his *Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), has linked this American loneliness to the futile attempt to overcome it through consumption. This is surely the case with Jud Fry who seeks to ease his isolation through his purchases.

Jud buys his pinups and other erotic paraphernalia from Ali Hakim. One of the items that he wants is called "The Little Wonder." This is an optical device that allows its viewer to look at one of two risqué pictures of women. Will Parker has brought back one of these devices from Kansas City as a present for Andrew Carnes, Ado Annie's father and Will's prospective father-in-law. Jud, however, is looking for a special model that contains a spring-loaded knife that will kill its viewer. His plan is to use it on Curly to put an end to their competition for Laurey. Death and sexuality come together in this device and in Jud's dark mind.

Will Parker has become involved in the trafficking in women in another way besides the purchase of "The Little Wonder." Andrew Carnes tells Will that he may have his daughter Ado Annie in marriage if he can save up a nestegg of \$50.00. On his trip to Kansas City, Will wins \$50.00 at the rodeo but spends it all on gifts for his fiancé and her father. Will no longer has enough money to give Carnes for Ado Annie. Ali Hakim, however, is able to extricate Will from this dilemma by buying Will's Kansas City

¹⁴Ibid., 47-48.

purchases from him for \$50.00. Additionally this frees Ali from having to marry Ado Annie at the point of her father's shotgun.

Will's trip to Kansas City provides another example of women as commodities in this culture. Included in Will's song "Kansas City" is a description of his visit to a burlesque theater:

Fer fifty cents you c'n see a dandy show.
One of the girls was fat and pink and pretty,
As round above as she was round below.
I could swear that she was padded from her shoulder to her
heel,
But later in the second act when she began to peel,
She proved that ev'rythin' was absolutely real--
She went about as fur as she could go!¹⁵

Here female flesh was literally for sale as a spectatorial commodity. The role of the loose woman and the prostitute in the American West has been examined by Patricia Limerick in *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. According to Limerick, prostitution was an essential form of employment for many western women: "With few jobs open to women, prostitution provided a route to income, though it seldom led past subsistence."¹⁶ The prostitutes found in the West were a diverse lot: white, black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian women. Limerick suggests that this situation corrects the monolithic view of Manifest Destiny (the philosophy underlying the white conquest of the West) in which whites oppressed only non-whites. Here, as in *Oklahoma!*, we see women as an exploited commodity in the American West. If the

¹⁵Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁶Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 49.

Western experience was a colonial one with all the accompanying trappings of conquest, then the white woman was part of that economic colonization whether she was Laurey Williams, Ado Annie, or one of the dance hall girls in the musical's Dream Ballet sequence.

The economic relationships outlined by *Oklahoma!* also represent a formula for community, providing supporting evidence for the decade's economic philosophy of solving domestic issues. This is apparent in the lyrics to "The Farmer and the Cowman," the first song of the musical's second act. The major portion of the song offers advice on the necessity of the farmer and the rancher (traditional Western rivals/enemies) being friends and working together cooperatively to assure the success of the community and eventual statehood for the territory. Near the end of the song Ike Skidmore, whose farm is the site of the box social and auction, sings this stanza:

And when this territory is a state,
And jines the union jist like all the others,
The farmer and the cowman and the *merchant* [*my emphasis*]
Must all behave theirsels and act like brothers.¹⁷

The addition of the word "merchant" is significant, for it underlines the economic significance of the relationship of these different groups in providing for the success of the community through consumption based upon mutual respect and understanding. In essence the community envisioned for a postwar Paradise would be an economic one.

¹⁷Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 54.

Box Office Buckaroos and Cowboy Consumers

The philosophy of consumption found in *Oklahoma!* places it within the parameters of other Westerns of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly the B Western and its singing cowboy star. During this period the singing cowboy became a marketing phenomenon and ultimately an icon of consumption. Gene Autry is a perfect example of this development. Autry became associated with a variety of products which used his name and image for endorsement. He became a spokesperson for brands of cereal such as Quaker Puffed Sparkies. Products ranging from children's clothing to gun and holster sets and lunch boxes would bear his picture and name. The Sears Roebuck Company marketed a Gene Autry guitar which often became the first guitar of the baby boomers born after the end of World War II. In addition to starring in motion pictures, Autry had a successful career as a radio and recording star. There were Gene Autry songbooks and sheet music for his most popular songs. Under such circumstances it should come as no surprise that he became a multi-millionaire and a symbol of the American Dream of wealth and success.

Roy Rogers, who followed in Autry's footsteps, also provided a marketing bonanza for numerous manufacturers. Books, records, clothing, watches, flashlights, and toys bore the Rogers imprint. The consumerist point of view extended to Rogers himself. In the 12 July 1943 issue of *Life* featuring Roy and his horse Trigger on the cover, we are shown an extensive number of fancy cowboy outfits comprising his wardrobe, a powerful symbol of 1940s style conspicuous consumption.

Another economic facet of the B Westerns and their singing cowboy stars was the genre's anachronistic flirtation with modernity. The B Western was frequently set in the contemporary twentieth century of the 1930s or 1940s and displayed an interesting mixture of the old and the new. It was possible to find automobiles as well as horses in many B Western chase sequences. Some of these Westerns, such as Gene Autry's *Public Cowboy No. 1* (1937) made use of modern technological devices such as airplanes, shortwave radios, and refrigerator trucks to steal herds of cattle. The presence of such icons of modernity and consumption echo the sentiments of Will Parker's "Kansas City."

Consumer interest in the cowboy and the Western were also demonstrated by the rise in popularity of Country and Western music during the decade. Sales of these recordings were at an all-time high for a national rather than a regional market. The music appealed to the taste of a broader base of Americans who gave it a new aura of respectability. The commercial value of this music was demonstrated by the proliferation of versions recorded by mainstream pop singers like Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters. The relation of this music to the American Dream of a postwar Paradise was illustrated by the popularity of Ernest Tubb's "A Rainbow at Midnight." This song relates the optimistic vision of a soldier returning home to his sweetheart after the war. While aboard a troop ship, he sees a rainbow in the sky which symbolizes for him the promise of the postwar world. That rainbow includes the ultimate goal of all postwar consumption:

We'll build a home in the country
And make all our dreams come true.¹⁸

During the 1940s, *Oklahoma!* itself became an icon of consumption. The musical produced a number of popular songs that received radio airplay and sold to consumers as sheet music. "People will say we're in love" was the top radio song of 1943 and sold 9,000 copies of sheet music per day.¹⁹ *Oklahoma!* was the first musical to issue its own cast album, thereby further packaging the musical for the consumer. Tickets to performances of *Oklahoma!* became highly prized commodities in their own right. Since they were hard to come by, wartime Americans were willing to trade other scarce items for the tickets. It was not unusual to find a steak or pair of nylons being swapped for a ticket. A musical with consumption as one of its themes itself became a highly prized consumer item.

Commercial Regionalism

In its consumerist ethos *Oklahoma!* represented a transformation similar to what happened to the Regionalist painting of the 1930s. The case of Thomas Hart Benton is instructive on this point. Erika Doss has demonstrated how, in the early 1940s, Benton's Regionalist style paintings were adopted for the purposes of advertising consumer

¹⁸Ernest Tubb, "Rainbow at Midnight," *Ernest Tubb Retrospective*, vol.1, MCA MCAD 20505.

¹⁹Max Wilk, *OK!: The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 239.

products.²⁰ The American Tobacco Company commissioned Benton to make a series of Regionalist type paintings to be used in magazine advertisements for Lucky Strikes. These full color ads appeared in the pages of magazines like *Life* where they became prototypical examples of what Doss has called “commercial regionalism.” During the war commercial artists appropriated this style. They used it in advertisements that combined encouragement for victory with the sale of American products like Coke and Pepsi-Cola.²¹ *Oklahoma!*, with its origins in 1930s regionalist drama and its wartime message of uplift and optimism and its commercial success, represents a similar transformation prompted by the consumerist ethos of the decade.

Both the Benton advertisements and the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical are examples of the phenomenon of corporate capitalism at work in the decade. Such an emphasis upon consumerism served to dull the edge of sociopolitical activity by transforming them into a desire for leisure activities and entertainment. These were the goals of the therapeutic ethos that had developed along with consumerism around the turn of the century.

Cowboys of the Crabgrass Frontier

The consumption of Western Americana represented by Country and Western music, the singing cowboy, and *Oklahoma!* achieved its apotheosis along the crabgrass

²⁰Erika L. Doss, “Borrowing Regionalism: Advertising’s Use of American Art in the 1930s and 40s,” *Journal of American Culture* 5 (Winter 1982): 10-19.

²¹*Ibid.*, 10-19.

frontier of postwar suburbia. Here the young of the postwar baby boom generation rode “the range once more” with Gene, Hoppy (Hopalong Cassidy), and Roy decked out in the latest cowboy paraphernalia and accessories. Snapshots from countless family albums of the era document the phenomenon of these baby boom buckaroos. In the 1950s Walt Disney partly financed the expansion of his entertainment empire by resurrecting Davy Crockett “King of the Wild Frontier” who became another instant icon of the pop culture frontier and the consumerism of the American young.

Shopping Down Among the Sheltering Palms

If Curly McLain and Laurey Williams helped to spread the consumerist ethos on the American western frontier, then Seabee Luther Billis brought the phenomenon to one island in the Pacific. In this respect Billis might be taken as a symbol of the advance guard for American capitalist expansion in that region. There was no individual, officer, enlisted man, American nurse, or native witch doctor who was not a potential customer for supersalesman and full-time hustler Luther Billis. He even tries to sell standard issue supplies to the GIs and nurses departing for “Operation Alligator.” Madison Avenue had come to “D-Day” in the Pacific.

Not only in its comedic but also in its economic dimensions, Billis plays a role similar to that of Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!*. The salesman became a dominant character in this decade of the consumer. One need only recall Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of A Salesman* (1949; opened the same year as *South Pacific*) which focused on the

underside of the consumerist American Dream and its negative effect on the American family.

Billis is economically linked to a number of the characters in the play. In a typical example of American ingenuity and desire to make a fast buck, Billis has set up a variety of useful services on the island to meet the needs of the servicemen and women arriving daily. He has his own laundry which washes and irons clothing for Nellie and the other nurses stationed on the island. The makeshift shower where Nellie tries to “wash that man right outa [her] hair” is one of Luther’s concoctions. Postwar America would become the proving ground for such labor-saving devices as washers and dryers. They helped reduce the burden of housework allowing women to take jobs outside of the home. In 1947 Proctor and Gamble began to market *Tide* as the first modern laundry detergent. In the summer of 1959 Vice President Richard Nixon would engage Russian premier Nikita Krushchev in a “kitchen debate” which included a discussion about the superiority of American-made washers and dryers.

Billis also attempted to corner the market on souvenirs to be sold to the soldiers and sailors on the island. These consisted of fake shrunken heads and grass skirts that the men liked to send back home to convince relatives of the exotic and “alien” landscapes that they now inhabited. Billis has adopted assembly-line techniques utilizing his fellow Seabees to manufacture these items quicker and cheaper.

During World War II an actual souvenir market did develop on a number of the Pacific islands where American troops were stationed. The natives bartered hand-crafted goods for coveted articles at the military post exchanges. They bargained with the

servicemen for cookies and candy. The soldiers requested favorite “curios,” especially seashell necklaces and grass skirts. Clearly, the process of trade and exchange generated and expanded contact between islanders and servicemen.²²

Billis and his mass-produced souvenirs come into direct conflict with Bloody Mary who had had the exclusive market. Mary is trying to amass enough capital for a dowry for her daughter Liat to marry a rich white planter. Billis tries to take advantage of Bloody Mary by trading her his mass-produced goods for a sacred boar’s tooth bracelet. Mary, however, outwits him. She trades the bracelet for his entire allotment of grass skirts and one hundred dollars cash. The staging of this scene in *South Pacific* is important. The location of Bloody Mary’s souvenir kiosk adjacent to Billis’s laundry and shower bath affords a conflict symbolic of that between American and Third World capital. After the war Americans would attempt broad economic penetration on the Pacific frontier. Billis and Bloody Mary were acting out a future scenario on a small scale. It is significant that Bloody Mary is a Tonkinese from Indochina, for in the postwar years the U.S. government sent economic and technological advisors to Indochina in hopes of improving the region’s yield of crafts, agricultural products, and manufactured goods. Industrial designer Russell Wright was among those sent to the area in the

²²Charles de Burlo, “Islanders, Soldiers, and Tourists: The War and the Shaping of Tourism in Melanesia,” in *The Pacific Theater: Island Representations of World War II*, ed. Geoffrey M. White and Lamont Lindstrom (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 299-325.

1950s.²³ American technology and economic power were being pitted against indigenous Third World industries.

South Pacific's economic structure, like that of *Oklahoma!*, also involved the traffic of women as commodities to be bought and traded. The relationship of Lt. Joe Cable with Bloody Mary and her daughter Liat demonstrates this business. Bloody Mary attempts to win Cable's support for her beachfront souvenir business by providing him with the sexual favors of the young Liat. Mary succeeds after serenading Cable with descriptions of the island of Bali Ha'i. Liat lives there with other women who, for safety, have been evacuated from the main island after the arrival there of military forces. Mary's song "Bali Ha'i" is a seductive melody evoking images of desire:

Bali Ha'i
Will whisper
On the wind
Of the sea:
'Here am I,
Your special island!
Come to me,
Come to me!'
'Your own special hopes
Your own special dreams,
Bloom on the hillside
And shine in the streams.'²⁴

In the development of the love relationship between Cable and Liat, Cable comes to associate his desire for her with the island of Bali Ha'i itself. Such a trope is found in

²³Arthur J. Pulos, *The American Design Adventure, 1940-1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 238-239.

²⁴Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 294.

American popular culture of the twentieth century, especially in examples of travel advertising. Advertisements for Hawaii and the South Seas usually included a grass-skirted native woman meant to symbolize the locale. Products such as tanning oils and perfumes utilized “woman as island” imagery to help sell the exotic aura associated with these “tropical” goods.

Bloody Mary’s transformation of her daughter into a commodity to entertain and distract Lt. Cable is an example of the confluence of economics and sexuality. During the war in Vietnam, the American military set up brothels in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian locations to meet the R & R needs of its servicemen. Seen in this context, Bloody Mary’s trip to Bali Ha’i with Cable becomes a prophetic moment in the history of America’s relationship with Southeast Asian people.²⁵

The character of Bloody Mary and her actions are rich with prophetic overtones. The economic ramifications surrounding her are vitally important. These implications emerge in the confrontation between Mary and Navy Captain George Brackett, who tries to shut down her lucrative souvenir business. Upon seeing her for the first time on the beach, he glares at her and says:

You are causing an economic revolution on this island.
These French planters can’t find a native to pick a coconut
or milk a cow because you’re paying them ten times as
much to make these ridiculous grass skirts.²⁶

²⁵Sandra Pollock Sturdevant, *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (New York: New Press, 1992).

²⁶Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 297.

The economic revolution mentioned by Brackett refers to Mary's challenge of the colonial economic structure on the island. That structure is the plantation system established by the French who controlled the island. Geographically, *South Pacific* is set on one of the islands of the New Hebrides, which were under French control. To run these large plantations profitably, the French needed a supply of cheap labor. They turned, therefore, to Indochina, one of their other colonial possessions, as a source of such labor. As French colonialism moved across the Pacific, it brought a number of indentured Indochinese laborers to the islands. In the New Hebrides they worked as servants and agricultural hands for the plantation owners. In nearby New Caledonia they were employed in the tin mines. The majority of Indochinese laborers came from the northern part of Indochina known as Tonkin China. Bloody Mary refers to herself as Tonkinese. She is as much of an outsider to the islands as the sailors and Marines.

Mary's economic revolution demonstrates to her fellow Tonkinese countrymen an alternative to the plantation system: western-style free enterprise. Just as Mary imitates the foul language and dress of her American customers, she also mimics their consumerist-based form of capitalism. Like Billis, she is proud to be making profits from the war and to have established a dowry for her daughter. Mary's imitating the American capitalist on the island is reminiscent of the indigenous Melanesians there. As American ships and planes continually unloaded goods, the Melanesians became increasingly impressed by such proliferation. After the war they established the so-called "cargo cults." Determined to bring back abundant supplies, the natives tried imitating the military personnel. They adopted the uniform. They marched in formation with "rifles"

carved from scraps of wood. They waited for the big boats and the “birds” to return and unload their precious cargo for the islanders.

Our first view of Bloody Mary is in an economic context. She appears to a group of Seabees, sailors, and Marines in Scene 2 of Act I where the first lines she utters are embedded in a consumerist sales pitch:

Mary: “Hallo, G.I.! (She holds up a grass skirt) Grass skirt ? Very saxy! Fo’ dolla’? Saxy grass skirt. Fo’ dolla’! Send home Chicago. You like ? You buy? (Her eyes scan the audience as if following a passer-by. Her crafty smile fades to a quick scowl as he apparently passes by without buying. She calls after him) Where you go ? Come back! Chipskate! Crummy G.I. Sadsack. Droopy-drawers!”²⁷

The first line of dialog contains not only an example of Mary’s economic orientation but also her determination and resistance to being pushed around or dominated not only by the French but also by the Americans. Confronted by Captain Brackett, she stands her ground. Defiantly she tells him she must strike out on her own, for, as she says: “French planters stingy bastards!”²⁸

In the spirit of American capitalist competition, Billis seizes upon the opportunity and tells Brackett: “The natives can now go back to work on the farms. The demand for grass skirts can now be met by us Seabees!”²⁹

²⁷Ibid., 283.

²⁸Ibid., 297.

²⁹Ibid., 298.

Billis' comments are economic in character but indicate misunderstanding of the situation. As previously indicated, Bloody Mary and Liat are not natives but indentured laborers taken from their homeland and made to work for the French. Furthermore, these "natives" do not simply work on farms--rather, they are part of an exploitative colonial plantation system. Such misunderstandings would follow Americans into the Pacific as they became increasingly involved with Southeast Asia in the postwar decades.

Another element characteristic of the economic relationships present in *South Pacific* is the connection between money and social class. Thus, among the three main American characters in the play there is a representation of the basic American social classes: Billis as a member of the lower class, Nellie of the middle class, and Cable of the patrician upper class. Luther's conversation with the young Marine illuminates the contrast between Cable and Billis:

Billis: You go to college ?

Cable: Er--yes.

Billis: Where ?

Cable: A place in New Jersey.

Billis: Where? Rutgers?

Cable: No . . . Princeton.

Billis: Oh. Folks got money, eh, Lieutenant? Don't be ashamed of it.³⁰

The large tattoo of a ship across Billis's abdomen is a less subtle reminder that he is a member of the lower classes.

Nellie's relationship with Emile also carries connotations of difference in class and economic background. Emile is a representative of the French colonial system. Like

³⁰Ibid., 296.

the other plantation owners on the island, he employs a number of indentured Tonkinese workers. One is Henri, his personal servant, who also watches over Emile's two children, Ngana and Jerome. In this economic system Emile becomes one of the richest men on the island. Living in luxury on a lavish plantation, he can entertain island aristocrats as well as the U.S. military officers. On this island Emile has been able to construct a Paradise. However, it needs a woman like Nellie to make it complete. This is not Emile's first plantation in the islands. Once he had a similar residence on Marie Louise, the island where he and Cable go on their reconnaissance mission. Ironically, Nellie Forbush is a native of the American South where the plantation system had been a way of life until the intervention of the Civil War. She has now traveled half-way around the world to find an economic system which originally characterized her native region of the United States. This was a system with more than economic implications. These implications will be discussed in Chapter 6.

South Pacific, like *Oklahoma!*, includes an economic Paradise of plenitude couched in the rhetoric of the natural. In both musicals there are songs that conjure up this Paradise. In *Oklahoma!*, it is a combination of "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" and "Oklahoma" that bracket the beginning and end of the musical with a sense of the agricultural abundance of the American West. "Bali Ha'i" in *South Pacific* serves a similar function. The island in the title is the locus of desire throughout the musical.

Luther Billis is quick to realize a golden opportunity on Bali Ha'i. Always the alert entrepreneur, Billis focuses on the boar's teeth used in a sacred island ritual. The boar or wild pig was a hallowed beast to the native Melanesians of the New Hebrides

where *South Pacific* takes place. The animals were carefully bred so that their tusks would grow inward, making two or three complete revolutions to create a source of readymade bracelets the natives wore as a fetish. Billis envisions great profits from these bracelets as valuable souvenirs. They are a ready source of cash. He knows Mary already has some of these. Billis's desire for this precious commodity is reminiscent of the cliché often used in Hollywood films about the South Seas: the white man lusting after island treasures such as pearls or buried gold. Luther Billis is a comedic version of this type.

Although Billis has bought one of the bracelets from Mary, he wants more and he makes known to his comrades his determination to get them:

Billis: That damned Bali Ha'i! (Turning and looking toward the twin-peaked island) Why does it have to be off limits? You can get everything over there. Shrunken heads, bracelets, old ivory---

Sailor: Young French women!

Billis: Knock off! I'm talking about souvenirs.

Professor: So's he. . . .

Billis: I'll latch onto some officer who's got some imagination . . . that would like to see that Boar's Tooth ceremonial as much as I would It's a hell of a ceremonial! Dancin', drinkin' . . . everything!

Sailor: Why you big phony. We all know why you want to go to Bali Ha'i.

Billis: Why?

Sailor: Because the French planters put all their young women over there when they heard the G.I.'s were coming. That's why! It ain't boar's teeth . . . it's women!

Billis: It is boar's teeth . . . and women!³¹

The group of sailors and Seabees then break into song, singing "There is Nothing Like a Dame":

³¹Ibid., 287-288.

There is nothin' like a dame
 Nothin in the world.
 There is nothin' you can name
 That is anythin' like a dame.³²

These sentiments bear an interesting relationship to “Lonely Room” sung by Jud Fry in *Oklahoma!* Both the lonely sailors and Jud tried to satisfy their lust for women through the process of commodification. The pinups, like those which decorated Jud’s smokehouse room, became a popular commodity during World War II. Pinups during the War were either Hollywood photographs such as the famous images of Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth or the fantasy creations of illustrator Alberto Vargas whose “Varga Girls” appeared in the pages of *Esquire* magazine (a special favorite among servicemen) or on pinup calendars and playing cards. Wherever the GI went, so went the ubiquitous pinup.

Cable’s arrival in the islands and Bloody Mary’s seductively serenading the Marine with “Bali Ha’i” finally provide an opportunity for Billis to get to the island and obtain some of the coveted bracelets. With his best salesman’s charm, he subtly tries to enlist Lieutenant Cable’s help:

Billis: Of course, Lieutenant, right now that island is off limits due to the fact that the French planters have all their young women running around over there. (He pauses to observe the effect of these significant words) Of course, you being an officer, you could get a launch. I’d even be willing to requisition a boat for you. What do you say, Lieutenant?

He then repeats some of Mary’s verses from “Bali Ha’i.” Cable says no to Billis’s entreaty, but the Seabee is not dissuaded from his mission:

³²Ibid., 289.

Billis: (Making a quick shift) I see what you mean, being off limits and all. It would take a lot of persuading to get me to go over there . . . but, another thing goes on over there--the ceremonial of the boar's tooth. After they kill the boar they pass around some of the coconut liquor and women dance with just skirts on . . . (His voice becoming evil) and everybody gets to know everybody pretty well . . .³³

Billis connects economics and sexuality. To the military stationed in the Pacific during that war, both women and boar's teeth bracelets were equally scarce and made both valuable commodities.

Conclusion

The examples of consumerism and commodification that appear in both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* attest to the economic base of the American Dream in the 1940s. That this economic American Dream was a preoccupation of the period is further supported by its appearance as a theme in Rodgers and Hammerstein's other musicals of the decade. *Carousel* (1945) is set among ascendant capitalists in a small New England town at the turn of the century. Mr. Bascombe is the wealthy owner of the textile mill where Julie Jordan and her friend Carrie Pipperidge are employed. Enoch Snow, Carrie's future husband, is an ambitious fisherman who turns a single boat into a fleet and eventually establishes his own fish cannery. In this environment of rising capitalists, Carnival Barker Billy Bigelow resorts to armed robbery rather than take charity to support his wife and the unborn child in her womb. In *State Fair* (1945 film) Margie Frake is courted by agri-businessman Harry Ware who tries to woo her with images of a

³³Ibid., 295-296.

farmhouse made of the latest pre-fabricated plastic floors covered with linoleum. The lush technicolor of the film and the abundance of goods displayed at the fair itself evoke a postwar consumer's Paradise. *Allegro* (1947) demonstrates the negative aspects of this version of the American Dream through the character of Jennie Brinker. Much to her husband's distress, Jennie spends her time climbing the social ladder and amassing a fortune. To support his wife's expensive tastes, Dr. Joe unhappily caters to a coterie of wealthy hypochondriacs. In the Depression Era sequence Jennie brings a touch of irony to the drama when she sings "Money Isn't Everything."

The American Dream of Paradise portrayed in *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* is an economic consumerist ethos. As discussed earlier, this version of Paradise had begun at the turn of the century with the development of what Lears called the therapeutic ethos, a response to the rapid modernization and transformation of the American nation then under way. This ethos advanced into the boom years of the 1920s, took a hiatus during the Depression, and then returned with a vengeance in the postwar 1940s. *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* trace that advance by highlighting two of the key moments of its development.

CHAPTER 3

A TRAVELER'S PARADISE: ARMCHAIR MUSICALS, LEISURE, AND TOURISM

Introduction

The consumerist component in the 1940s musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein was linked to the idea of a society of leisure. From the turn of the century forward, Americans, especially the middle classes, were discovering more time for leisure activities. The therapeutic ethos and consumerism went hand-in-hand in filling up this leisure. *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* involve Americans enjoying leisure activities. In *Oklahoma!*, Will Parker goes to a fair and burlesque show in Kansas City. Back home the entire community turns out for the box social or “play party.” In *South Pacific* Nellie Forbush attends dance parties and dinners at the plantation of Emile de Becque. Cable and Billis visit the island of Bali Ha'i where they watch the women of the island and view the boar's tooth ceremony. Nellie, Billis, and the nurses stage a Thanksgiving Day show for the troops.

Leisure activities play a prominent part in Rodgers and Hammerstein's other musicals of the decade. In *Carousel*, the people go to an amusement park, ride the carousel, and forget their toils and troubles for a little while. The entire community stops work and sails to another island where they celebrate at an annual clambake. In *State Fair*, the story focuses on the visit of a farm family to the Iowa State Fair where they play games, try out the amusement rides, and dance to the sounds of a big band. In all these musicals there is little evidence of work and productivity. Rather, the performances

present the new world of leisure and sightseeing. Indeed, leisure appears to be more important than labor. In an industrialized world of streamlined and repetitive work, these leisure activities take on added value by helping individuals experience some sense of freedom from their workaday world. Leisure is an opportunity for exploring one's own skills and creative capacities.

Leisure also represents a search for what Matisse in one of his paintings, called "Luxe, calme, and volupté" which translates to a longing for a utopia or paradisaical environment. As such it may be seen as a troubled quest for another culture thought to be purer and more authentic than the one in which the leisure seeker now finds himself. Much of this was an illusion, however, for part of the therapeutic ethos involved the creation of a leisure industry to meet these needs and demands of the populace.

A part of the leisure experience traversed by the musicals was an interest in travel and sightseeing as a means of reviving sagging spirits. This interest also became a packaged commodity through the development of the tourist industry. *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, and the other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals of the 1940s participate directly in this form of leisure activity. Their participation is two-fold. On one level, the musicals record the new leisure activities and at the same time are leisure activities themselves.

The Armchair Musical

Oklahoma! and *South Pacific* may be described as "armchair musicals." First, if successful, they give several hours of pleasurable relaxation to the audience. In this sense

they resemble the art of twentieth century French painter Henri Matisse. In his *Notes of a Painter* (1908) Matisse suggested a function for his paintings that is directly applicable to the Broadway musical:

What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he business man or writer like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good *armchair* in which to rest from physical fatigue.¹

Leisure activities such as going to a musical became an important form of relaxation for modern Americans fatigued by the demands of the modern world. In the 1930s and 1940s, magazines frequently ran advertisements for travel or tourism as an antidote to counteract the stresses of the work environment. In the September 1930 issue of *Travel*, for example, White Star/Red Star Steamship Lines placed an advertisement aimed at the modern businessman and his wife. Under the headline of “Watch Your Husband” is a drawing of the face of a weary and care-worn executive set before a background of skyscrapers and busy city traffic. The intent of the ad is to warn wives to watch for signs of spousal exhaustion in the corporate world. There is a question, “Is the price of success beginning to tell?”² Another ad from the same series in the October 1930 issue of *Travel* prescribes a South Seas cruise as the perfect antidote:

What men need desperately--and never dream of taking--is a complete rest--a change of scene that will bring them

¹Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, 3rd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1974), 44.

²*Travel*, 30 September 1930, 6.

back to work with sparkling eyes--youthful energies--
irresistible ambition!

A sea voyage will do this for your husband. That's what
physicians are recommending as ideal treatment for tired
bodies, frayed nerves, minds exhausted from overwork.

Sail away together on a **Red Star** or **White Star** liner.
Sights to wonder at . . . new friends to make! The salty tang
of the ocean--healthful rays of ocean sun! Every day
something new and glamorous!³

The search for relaxation from the DIS-EASE of the modern world aimed at
consumerist solutions. Leisure time activities were part of the therapeutic ethos discussed
in the previous chapter. As indicated by the examples above, travel and tourism expand.
It is in the arena of the touristic experience that we find the second meaning of
Oklahoma! and *South Pacific* as armchair musicals. Part of the world of modern tourism
has involved the element of armchair travel. The term armchair suggests removal from
active involvement. An armchair traveler experiences vicariously by means of books,
magazines, photographs, motion pictures, and plays. The appearance of magazines like
National Geographic just before the turn of the century helped spread the vicarious
opportunities around the world.

The Broadway musical is part of the touristic experience both actually and
vicariously. Every year a significant percentage of tickets to Broadway musicals is sold to
tourists who have come to New York City to take in the spectacles of the city: the Statue

³*Travel*, October 1930, 6.

of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the latest Broadway hit.

During World War II, a large portion of the audience for *Oklahoma!* (1943) and, subsequently, *Carousel* (1945) were tourists. Wartime increased the influx of temporary populations into the city. New York was overflowing with servicemen on weekend passes from training centers like New Jersey's Fort Dix or GIs embarking to or returning from the theaters of war in Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific. The Stage Door Canteen, where Broadway celebrities entertained and fed these soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen helped promote an interest in current New York City theatrical productions.

Agnes De Mille, *Oklahoma!*'s choreographer, has described the nature of these wartime audiences attending performances of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical:

Every night at the theater the crowds jostled and pushed and laughed and went out singing. And always at the back of the house was a double row of uniforms standing and gazing with misted eyes at the final joyous statement of what they were leaving behind. These were the songs the men and women went away whistling and taught to others under heartbreaking circumstances. This was the show soldiers kept talking about. New York meant not only the gateway to home, but this show. *Oklahoma!* became almost as important to them as Rita Hayworth, but there was a good bit of sweetheart and kid sister involved in *Oklahoma!*.⁴

The Broadway audience broadened when defense workers earned discretionary income they could spend on entertainment. The theater offered diversion from the assembly line. According to Paul Casdorff, the war fundamentally altered the nature of Broadway:

⁴Agnes DeMille, *And Promenade Home* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 36.

The civilians and servicemen who invaded Times Square were basically moviegoers from small-town America accustomed to theaters in which shirt-sleeves, casual dress, and popcorn were the norm. Yet the same people--their wallets stuffed with defense factory money--thought nothing of purchasing front-row tickets for a night on the town.⁵

During the economic boom of the postwar 1940s, this out-of-town leisure-seeking audience expanded and swelled the ranks of those who attended *South Pacific*. This touristic audience came from the broad reaches of America. They represented the rise of a larger leisure class attracted to the essentially middle-class art form of the Broadway musical. This group responded to the American Dream optimism of “beautiful mornin’s” and “enchanted evenings” and thrived on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “happy talk” which permitted a young Marine Lieutenant to feel “younger than springtime” despite the horrors of war in the Pacific.

Rodgers and Hammerstein and the Touristic Imagination

Specific geographical settings play an important part in setting the mood and color of the majority of the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. These productions provide a Broadway travelogue, and each musical is like a travel poster whetting the touristic appetite.

The musicals represent various aspects of tourism and touristic sites that would have been familiar to the American public at the time. *Oklahoma!* demonstrates the

⁵Paul D. Casdorff, *Let the Good Times Roll: Life at Home in America During World War II* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 132.

perennial fascination with the American West of the cowboy. *Carousel* explores the world of leisure and amusement parks. *State Fair* captures the nation's love affair with the patriotic Americana of the midwestern county fair. *South Pacific* offers the allure of the Paradise of the exotic South Seas island. *The King & I* transports its audience to the nineteenth century palace of the King of Siam. *The Flower Drum Song* provides a musical tour of San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1950s. *The Sound of Music*, their final collaboration, offers a glimpse of the beauties of the Austrian Alps on the eve of World War II.

The musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein participate in an age of tourism marked by three stages. The first division is the Depression when numerous Americans took to the road in search of work. Others traveled during that decade to discover the character of their nation. In World War II there was extensive travel within the nation's borders as military personnel were shipped from a training base in one part of the country to a totally different region. The expansion of war industries in various parts of the country resulted in large scale migrations of populations to new locations, such as the whites and blacks who came to Detroit from the rural South. In this worldwide conflict, Americans were sent to the far reaches of the world where they came into contact with new people and places. The third division of this age of tourism and travel was the postwar era when Americans continued to explore their national and global surroundings, visiting overseas locations in greater numbers than before the war. The Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals trace that evolution from *Oklahoma!* to *South Pacific*.

Tourism and the Touristic Experience

Before examining the touristic elements of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, we must consider some of the general characteristics of tourism and the touristic experience in the twentieth century. This will prepare us to analyze these characteristics in the musicals. I have already indicated that the two musicals themselves were tourist attractions during the decade. As such they share the three basic characteristics of the tourist attraction as outlined by Dean MacCannell.⁶ The three components of the tourist attraction are: the sight, the marker, and the tourist. The marker is something that represents the tourist attraction either “on-sight” or “off-sight.” In the process of sightseeing, the tourist moves from marker to marker until he reaches the sight. *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* had their own set of popular culture markers to attract the tourists. Off-sight there were record albums (*Oklahoma!* was the first Broadway musical to issue its own cast album) and sheet music. Both off-sight and on-sight there were posters. *Oklahoma!*’s poster was bright yellow with stylized figures of dancing cowboys and women. There are figures suggesting Curly and Laurey, Ado Annie with her shotgun-toting father Andrew Carnes, and cowboy Will Parker next to a dance hall girl.

Many theatergoers to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1940s musicals would have heard some of the songs on record, the radio, or played from sheet music on a family piano. Such markers enhanced enthusiasm for seeing the musical production. The musicals themselves became markers for more “authentic” touristic experiences: visits to

⁶Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books), 1976.

the American West or the South Seas. Here they were serving in their function as “armchair musicals.”

The touristic experience parallels both drama and religious experience. The voyage of the tourist, with its beginning, middle, and end, imitates the Aristotelian divisions of drama. The process is also characterized by what MacCannell describes as “sight sacralization.” This involves the steps of naming, framing, elevating, enshrinement, and mechanical and social reproduction. Each of these stages of sacralization may be applied to the Broadway musical. The actual production and staging of the musical brings together the naming, framing, and elevation of the sight. Enshrinement would involve the placement of the musical in a Broadway theater such as the St. James where *Oklahoma!* ran for over five years. Mechanical reproduction would be represented by the creation of recordings, sheet music, and libretti so that the musical could be enjoyed away from its primary site. Finally, social reproduction would be illustrated by the musical’s function as a morality play helping the audience deal with social issues such as the search of community and tolerance.

Tourism and the touristic experience represented in the musicals must, according to MacCannell, be seen in relationship to the development of modernity. In this relationship, tourism takes on a social function. In the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society there has been an important shift from work to leisure as the center of modern social arrangements. The new emphasis on leisure over work, as seen in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, has been previously mentioned. In modern society leisure activities rather than work increasingly serve to define the individual. It is leisure

(in this case tourism) that draws the individual into a relationship with modern society. Tourism becomes a societal process, renewing society in the heart of the individual, reducing the sense of alienation that is a product of modernity.

As a form of ideology, tourism can act as the opiate of the modern masses. The touristic experience of attending a Broadway musical provides a form of escapism from modernity. Tourism is a response to the industrialization and urbanization accompanying modernization. The rapid progress of modernity led individuals to mourn the passing of an earlier way of life which is viewed as being more “authentic” than the current environment. Such a way of thinking leads to a nostalgic quest by the tourist for more “authentic” experiences:

For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere in other historical periods and cultures, in purer, simpler life styles.⁷

As examples of touristic experience, *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* conform to this model. The Western Americana (“other historical periods”) of *Oklahoma!* and the South Seas idyll (“other cultures”) of *South Pacific* provided their audiences with examples of “purer, simpler life styles” that served as a cushion against modernity in a rapidly changing world.

Associated with this nostalgic element is the idea of the touristic imagination in which the tourist (theater goer) readily accepts the version of reality created by the producer. This is usually motivated by the desire on the part of the consumer or spectator

⁷Ibid., 3.

to maximize his or her experience. The power of the touristic imagination in the modern world has been examined by George Lewis in an article on the Maine tourist industry. For Lewis, the touristic imagination is equivalent to the idea of “romancing the past”:

The propositions that are central to this image . . . seem to spring from the romantic tradition that views urban life in this century with suspicion and dread while at the same time idealizing the ‘wilderness’ as a place for individual redemption and the discovery of universal truths. . . . According to this view, there is something intrinsically quieter and more simple about Maine--spending time there is both comforting and rejuvenating to the urban dweller.⁸

The emphasis here is placed upon rejuvenating the twentieth-century soul and rediscovering a lifestyle that had been lost in the contemporary world. This was the effect on audiences attending Rodgers and Hammerstein’s nostalgic Americana musicals of the 1940s: *Oklahoma!*, *State Fair*, and *Carousel*. Significantly, *Carousel* was set in Maine which, in the 1940s, was experiencing its own touristic revival:

The lure of the mythic Maine took on new meaning in the 1940s, as individuals from outside the state, battered by the Depression and the on-going world war hoped to get back in touch with the strength of traditional values and themselves by moving ‘back to the land.’⁹

Those individuals that were lured to such landscapes through actual travel or vicariously through books, magazines, or Broadway musicals “were seeking such a haven from the

⁸George H. Lewis, “The Maine That Never Was: The Construction of Popular Myth in Regional Culture,” *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 92.

⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

world of uncertainty and war.”¹⁰ In a troubled world such landscapes were “like a glimpse into paradise.”¹¹

However, embedded within the nostalgic discourse of tourism is what MacCannell refers to as “the conquering spirit of modernity.”¹² In such a discourse, the expansion of modern society is linked in a variety of ways to modern mass leisure such as international tourism and sightseeing.¹³ The decades of the 1940s and 50s that marked the collaboration of Rodgers and Hammerstein were an important moment for travel, tourism, and sightseeing. This was paralleled by the global expansion of American hegemony within the contemporary geopolitical arena.

The touristic impulse in the Americana musicals like *Oklahoma!* may be related to the interest in travel and tourism generated by the publication of The American Guide Series between 1935 and 1943. They were a series of automobile travel books representing each of the forty-eight states. They were prepared by individuals participating in the Federal Writer’s Project. This was part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) which, as a New Deal agency, helped support art and culture during the Depression. The guide to Oklahoma was published in 1941 just two years before the musical opened on Broadway.

¹⁰Ibid., 96.

¹¹Ibid., 95.

¹²MacCannell, *Leisure Class*, 3.

¹³Ibid., 3.

The guides were prepared to serve and promote automobile tourism which was rapidly becoming a big business by the end of the 1930s. In the latter half of the decade American confidence began to return in response to an improving economy. With the construction of a national highway system and the development of motor hotels or “motels” that provided convenient lodging for overnight trips, automobile travel became easier. The crisis of the Depression led many Americans to turn their attention toward their own country, leading to an era described by the slogan “See America First.”¹⁴

The books in the American Guide Series, like the 1940s musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, were upbeat in a time of crisis and doubt. Like the musicals, they presented an America that was beautiful, fun-loving, full of energy, and predominantly rural and populist. Their optimism helped Americans forget the bitter times of the preceding years of economic depression.

In the manner of a musical like *Oklahoma!*, the guides were “celebrations of what was felt to be uniquely American.”¹⁵ Democracy was a key issue in the first half of the 1940s when the guides were being written and *Oklahoma!* was in its initial stages of creation. Such a point of view was a cultural defense against events that were occurring abroad in Europe and Asia and were deemed to be a threat to that democratic way of life.

¹⁴Bill Stott, *Introduction to Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series*, ed. Archie Hobson (New York: Collier Books, 1985), 2-3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

Oklahoma! and Western Travel

Popular travel books and magazines published during this period present a view of the touristic experience very similar to that of *Oklahoma!* and other Americana musicals produced in the first half of the decade. This is especially evident in the patriotic tone of a number of these publications. *Travel*, a magazine published since the early decades of the twentieth century, addressed such issues in editorials published after American entry into World War II. The magazine struck a decidedly nationalistic tone in July of 1942:

And it will also be our duty to rediscover our own great country, its traditions, its amazing variety, its remarkable and resourceful people, its notable achievements in peace as well as war.¹⁶

Similar sentiments are found in *Fair Is the Land*, a 1942 travel book designed and edited by Samuel Chamberlain, a writer, artist, and photographer specializing in historic Americana. The book was very popular with the American public and, by 1944, was in its fourth printing. The introduction written by Donald Moffat was a call to patriotism and a refutation of isolationism. Nationalism must replace parochial regionalism. The book's purpose, described in an editorial note by Chamberlain, is similar to that of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals of wartime Americana such as *Oklahoma!*:

This volume seeks to portray the beauty of the American countryside at a time when the preservation of this fair land, and all it stands for are uppermost in the minds of all Americans. It is the picture of a peaceful America, the land that awaits the returning soldier and sailor, *serene and*

¹⁶"To Our Readers," *Travel*, July 1942, 2.

comforting. [my emphasis] It does not encompass the might of our cities nor the dynamic energy of our industry. That is a theme for a book in itself. . . . *Its objective is to distill the essence of rural America.*¹⁷ [my emphasis]

Among the sections featured in *Fair Is Our Land* is one entitled “The Great West,” which opens with a photograph of Monument Valley that was made famous as a backdrop for the Westerns of John Ford such as the 1939 classic *Stagecoach*. There are a number of pictures of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. Although the emphasis is on landscape, there are several that show cowboys riding the range in the employ of the cattle industry. Strangely, although a number of the photographs were taken for the Farm Security Administration by photographers like Arthur Rothstein and Russell Lee, there are no glimpses of Oklahoma which had been a site for a great deal of FSA photography. Perhaps the publishers of the book were afraid that the Depression decade plight of this dust bowl state was too fresh in the public’s memory. Rodgers and Hammerstein were more courageous in bringing this subject to the stage during another time of crisis: World War II.

In the twentieth century, as the twin arms of modernity (urbanization and industrialization) spread across the American landscape, the American West with its frontier associations became increasingly appealing to the American tourist. This interest was shaped by the legacy of the vision outlined by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his landmark address to the American Historical Association at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition held in Chicago. Entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in

¹⁷Samuel Chamberlain, *Fair Is Our Land* (New York: Hastings House, 1942), 21.

American History,” the core of its thesis was that the frontier had shaped the growth of the nation and the character of its people. For Turner, the frontier and American democracy were inseparable. The down side to Turner’s thesis was that the frontier was now closed and it was difficult to determine what effect this might have on the nation.

Modern America was able to adapt to this situation by setting aside parts of the West that would be untouched by modernity and would provide Americans with an alternative to the predominant urban industrial civilization. Turner’s thesis that a connection existed between the frontier and the American character provided an impetus for the preservation of areas of the American West that would serve as oases of rejuvenation in the modern world. During the New Deal years of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency, the federal government actively put money into national parks and monuments in western states like Arizona, promoting tourism and encouraging Americans to experience the national heritage first hand. A musical like *Oklahoma!* served a function similar to these federally sponsored monuments by acting as a gateway to America’s mythic past and an idealized view of nature. Both musical and monument provided a reminder of the nation’s pioneer days in an increasingly urban environment. Both supplied spiritual renewal and provided symbols of nationalism and patriotism.

The western frontier was viewed as a repository of national virtue. *Oklahoma!* and the western landscapes became a well to be dipped into for regeneration in the modern age. Musical and monument offered their spectators a chance to immerse themselves in the myth of the frontier and to cleanse their souls. As a park official observed in 1941:

With almost 17,000,000 people coming yearly under the spell of the unspoiled wilderness and the scenes of great drama of our advancing culture, we can exert a powerful influence for the good of our national life.¹⁸

Musicals like *Oklahoma!* and western tourist sites like Monument Valley were also linked by consumerism and the therapeutic ethos. Both the Broadway musical and the Western tourist attraction became commodities eagerly sought by middle class Americans seeking change and renewal. Whether purchasing tickets for a show or seats on a Santa Fe bound train, they hoped to be buying an entertaining and memorable experience. At both sites they could recharge their batteries and return to the work world refreshed and ready to resume their routine lives. The seekers of the Western mythic landscape, whether on stage or in the painted desert, “found escape from the crowded, polluted, and stressful landscapes of home in the otherness of western public lands.”¹⁹

Oklahoma! is representative of the nationalistic Western Americana described in American travel magazines of the late 1930s and 40s. During this time period the region was revisited by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration who had recorded the plight of the region during the dust bowl days of the Great Depression. This time, however, Roy Stryker, the head of the program’s photographic division, told his photographers to go in search of positive images that portrayed America as a land of abundance preparing for inevitable involvement in the world war raging overseas. Among

¹⁸Kerwin L. Klein, “Frontier Products: Tourism, Consumerism, and the Southwestern Public Lands, 1890-1990,” in *Pacific Historical Review* 62 (February 1993), 55.

¹⁹Ibid., 62.

the images Stryker told his photographers to look for were the cowboys of the American West. In 1939 Arthur Rothstein who, earlier in the decade, had recorded many of the most powerful images of the devastation caused by the Oklahoma dust storms, was sent to Colorado and Montana where he photographed cowboys at work on the American land. These, like the cowboys in *Oklahoma!*, were positive images demonstrating the nation's search for American heroes and icons to oppose the dictatorships in Europe and Asia.

Western photographs by Rothstein, Russell Lee, and John Vachon were used to illustrate articles in magazines like *Travel* throughout the 1940s. Articles with titles like "Riding the Western Ranges" (November 1940) and "Cowpunchers Still Ride the Range" (July 1941) were popular. The latter article by Charles Belden was a tribute to the cowboy and his continuing importance in American history:

The cowboy is a product of certain conditions existing in the West, and his life in vast spaces of the range country has long made him an object of romantic interest the world over. He has always been the most picturesque figure of this country. . . .²⁰

Belden also suggests the appeal of the cowboy to the American public, an appeal that would be carried over into *Oklahoma!*:

Essentially, however, the cowboy has in all times been 'just folks'; a happy-go-lucky, carefree individual living an active and at times an adventurous life in the open.²¹

²⁰Charles J. Belden, "Cowpunchers Still Ride the Range," *Travel*, July 1941, 22.

²¹*Ibid.*, 22.

The cowboy is a representative American who approaches life's crises with an optimistic outlook. He was able to maintain the kind of viewpoint necessary in times of economic depression and global conflict:

He has always been prone to take life as he found it, and to accept hardships and privations without complaint. He learned to take exposure to winter blizzards or to the scorching heat of the desert sun with a philosophy that stood him in good part.²²

The American public's response to the positive and upbeat melodies and lyrics of singing cowboys like Gene Autry and *Oklahoma!*'s Curly McLain during the difficult times of the Depression and World War II is better understood through Belden's discussion of the relationship existing between the cowboy and music:

[The cowboy] has always been full of the joy of life, and an honest-to-goodness cowpuncher has the ability to sing as well as ride. The ballads of the West have been a distinct niche in the folk songs of the United States. Men on the range took the times of the day and fitted them to the rhythm of the moving horse; they sang their herds to sleep at night and in the daytime urged them up the trail with songs which sometimes burst into yells. Cowboys often applied words and music to everyday incidents, sometimes to cure loneliness with the sound of their own voices, sometimes to ease up the tension of a restless herd, and often to give vent to pent-up enthusiasms.²³

The commodification of the West for the modern consumer was evident in the pages of *Travel*. The December 1942 issue included Western paintings on both its front and back covers. These were from the Douthitt Galleries of New York City, "the home of Western

²²Ibid., 22.

²³Ibid., 22.

paintings and sculpture.” Frederic Remington’s *Attack on the Supply Wagons* illustrated an advertisement for the gallery on the back of the magazine. The power of Western imagery and consumer value are conflated in the text accompanying the picture:

In the splendid collection on exhibit at our galleries are many other colorful and vigorous paintings portraying the life of mountain and plain in an era of our civilization which has but recently passed. These pictures, in fact, record the unwritten history of our West from which future historians will obtain local color in making vivid its early days.

In times of war and inflation prudent people invest their money in paintings by well-known artists which retain their value. Their possession and enjoyment bring a satisfaction that is beyond estimation.²⁴

Dude Ranches

Another form of the commodification of the West within the realm of the touristic experience is represented by the dude ranch. The history of the dude ranch phenomenon was recounted in the June 1941 issue of *Travel* in an article entitled “The Northwest Mounted Dudes” by Grace Ernestine Ray. Dude ranching began in the 1880s when the Eton brothers of North Dakota established the first dude ranch to accommodate men, women, and children visting the West. This type of vacation appealed especially to Eastern businessmen in search of escape from their usual business routine among the skyscraper canyons of the big cities.

²⁴*Travel*, December 1942, back cover.

During the first half of the twentieth century, rapid expansion of the dude ranch movement indicated its popularity. There were dude ranches as far “west” as the Philippines and as far east as New England. Western-style riding clubs were popular even in urban confines of New York City.

[Dude ranches] represented the most acceptable alternative to the heat and tensions of the East for Americans who had grown up among grain fields rather than cattle ranges, and to whom there was something painful in the memory of their real pioneer or rural past. If the dude ranches seemed sometimes to represent a kind of re-creation of the Western dime novel or radio serial program . . . nevertheless there had been a cattle country, there still was one (though) of a different kind) and it would have been more difficult to amuse resident tourists on miniature versions of Western wheat, sheep, or sugar-beet ranches, or in the copper mines of Butte or the lumber camps of Western Oregon.²⁵

The dude ranches with activities centered around horses and the daily rituals of the cowboy satisfied the eastern clientele’s thirst for action and the great outdoors. For a brief moment they could ride horseback, sleep under the stars, and pretend that they were cowboys carrying on the pioneer traditions of those early Americans.

Travel carried advertisements for dude ranches throughout the 1930s and 1940s accompanied by Madison Avenue copy writer descriptions of the delights of the American West. The targeted audience of tired businessmen is evident in a 1941 full-page advertisement for Northern Pacific Railroad’s Yellowstone Park Line. The text

²⁵Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 171-172.

accompanying a photograph of cowboys and cowgirls riding through a spectacular mountain landscape tells the reader to “Take it easy to a Dude Ranch!”:

Then relax in the North Coast Limited’s big-windowed observation club car, and *watch the rest of the West roll by* [my emphasis] under your nose. *One business day out of Chicago* [my emphasis]-- and you’re in the ranch country. There with a smart little cowpony under you, and a string of mountain ranges at your elbow, you’re headed for one of the best vacation’s you’ll ever have!²⁶

The railroad’s intention to make the businessman an armchair spectator of breath-taking Western scenery parallels the effect sought by Rodgers and Hammerstein in *Oklahoma!* The musical’s opening number, “Oh, what a beautiful mornin’,” seeks to “create an atmosphere of relaxation, peace, and tenderness.”²⁷

The wartime relationship between the attractions of the West and an American public in search of escape and restoration is a theme common to articles, editorials, and advertisements in the 1940s:

Wars now prevent foreign travel, and patronage is increasing at dude ranches. It seems that the glamor of the West still reigns in the hearts of the people, even though the violent Old West is dead, and only memories remain of Indian fights, gold rushes and free range wars.²⁸

The January 1944 issue of *Travel* reported on the 1943 annual meeting of the Dude Ranchers Association in Billings, Montana:

²⁶*Travel*, May 1941, 37.

²⁷Oscar Hammerstein II, *Lyrics* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Books, 1985), 10.

²⁸*Travel*, June 1941, 39.

In spite of curtailed travel in 1943, Association affairs are in the best condition of any year. Many ranches had a very successful season in spite of wartime conditions. Many eastern families spent the entire summer at the ranches. Often executives in war production spent a much needed vacation on the ranches, some under doctor's orders, and often guests were service men on furloughs joining their families for ranch vacations.²⁹

Dude ranches were considered to be built upon what Oren Arnold called the three R's of Romance, Rest, and Recreation. The romantic component centered around the figure of the cowboy:

Remember it is that one hundred percent American known as the cowboy who brings glamor to the range. . . . The cowboy, generically, is the most picturesque individual to perform on the American scene . . . what is it little boys want to be when they play act? Who beside a certain masked rider is tops on the radio? Whom do the debs and subdebs sigh over, and what one figure connotes most of freedom and self reliance in all our eyes?³⁰

Curly McLain summed up such attributes in the Broadway production of *Oklahoma!* and the musical itself took on the role of a theatrical dude ranch where busy executives, war workers, and military personnel could take a break from the wartime world and escape, if only briefly, into the romance of the American West.

Another element of the touristic experience that links *Oklahoma!* to the dude ranch experience is the concept of "staged authenticity." This is a situation in which the tourist is allowed into the space of the "natives" and permitted to watch their routines so

²⁹*Travel*, January 1944, 33.

³⁰Oren Arnold, "A Cowboy Looks at the Dudes," *Travel*, November 1941, 33.

that they come to feel an intimate part of the “others” environment. This type of experience has taken on enhanced value in a society where individuals have come to believe that the experience of others is more authentic than their own, especially those from another “time” or place. The modern tourist is in search of “authenticity” and the pleasure it can bring. Heritage sites such as restored or reconstructed Western towns often stage mock holdups or gunfights to entertain the tourists. Both the dude ranch and *Oklahoma!* are examples of such staged authenticity. In subsequent years, theme parks such as those created by Walt Disney would make staged authenticity a central focus of the touristic experience provided for consumers.

South Seas Idylls

If *Oklahoma!* transported the 1940s theater audience to the American West in an armchair equivalent of the dude ranch experience, then *South Pacific* provided the armchair version of the South Seas idyll. By the time the musical opened on Broadway in 1949, Americans had been exposed to a variety of images of this region of the world. These images varied from a prewar Paradise to a wartime hell on earth.

Much of the prewar image of the South Pacific was a product of popular culture and therefore, like the image of the American West, included a significant portion of myth. The sources of this mythic image were numerous and varied. Books, magazines, motion pictures, songs, and advertisements all contributed to its creation. A lot of the myth was filtered through Hawaii which had been an American possession since the turn

of the century. Technically, Hawaii was in the North Pacific, but it came to stand in for the romantic image of the whole region.

The image consisted of a specific set of components built around depictions of landscape and people. There were islands with sandy white beaches, numerous palm trees, exotic flowers and vegetation, and frequently a mountain with an active volcano. The weather and climate were ideal for relaxing and taking it easy. A full moon behind a group of palm trees cast its benevolent and romantic rays on couples enjoying the beaches. Spectacular sunsets and beautiful rainbows reaffirmed the paradisaical nature of the geography. The islands supplied cornucopias of bountiful and exotic foods, pineapples and coconuts, all against a backdrop of exotic music featuring the siren sound of steel guitars and ukuleles.

The local men never seemed to need to work. They lived in a cycle of eating, sleeping, swimming, and fishing. Their main purpose was to entertain visitors with music and dancing. The native women were beautiful with long, shiny black hair, usually ornamented with an exotic flower or two. They were grass-skirted and bare from the waist up. Their function was to be charming, alluring and, above all, hospitable to visitors.

All of this was the stuff of romance which had continued to develop since the days of explorers like Captain James Cook who sent back descriptions of the exotic paradises. In the nineteenth century writers and artists, including Herman Melville and Paul Gauguin, added to the South Seas image. They were succeeded in the twentieth century by Somerset Maugham, author of *The Moon and Sixpence* and short stories like

“Rain,” whose Sadie Thompson is an unforgettable character. Charles Nordoff and James Norman Hall popularized the South Seas in the 1930s through their trilogy of novels about the *Mutiny on the Bounty*. In 1947 James Michener became the heir to this tradition with the publication of *Tales of the South Pacific*, the inspiration for the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. The literary and artistic view of the South Seas helped to establish a number of major themes that would persist to the present day: the romantic myth of the noble savage in an edenic paradise, the despoiling of paradise by the white man and a resultant utopian critique of Western civilization, the corrupting influence of paradise upon the white man, and the theme of interracial love.

By the twentieth century the image had become a staple of the popular culture industry and modern media. Hollywood tapped into the myth through numerous motion pictures in the 1930s and 1940s. These included *Tabu* (1931), *Rain* (1931), *Bird of Paradise* (1932), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *The Hurricane* (1937), and *Song of the Islands* (1942). Dorothy Lamour starred in a number of films in the genre in which she was usually seen wearing a colorful sarong and hibiscus blossoms in her hair. In these films the natives were usually graceful and light-skinned rather than dark and savage cannibals. Glenn Man has summed up the nature of these films:

As escapist fare, the Hollywood South Seas film offered a two-hour glimpse of an edenic paradise where the natives were simple, childlike, and innocent, where everyday activities consisted of fishing, gathering coconuts and

bananas, feasting dancing, and of course lovemaking, and then more lovemaking.³¹

Music played an important role in many of these films. *Waikiki Wedding* (1937), starring Bing Crosby and Martha Raye, helped to popularize several examples of pseudo-Hawaiian music such as “Blue Hawaii” and “Sweet Leilani,” which were both featured in the film and became worldwide hits. (As noted in Chapter 1, Crosby, ever aware of current trends, also helped to make cowboy music popular to a mass audience in the 1930s and 1940s.) On the eve of World War II, pseudo-Hawaiian music achieved a high degree of popularity with the American public. Two of the best-known composers of this music were Harry Owens and Johnny Noble. These two white band leaders, who were featured attractions at Honolulu resort hotels such as the Royal Hawaiian, were responsible for many examples of *hapa haole* (“half white”) music. This music incorporated Hawaiian words into predominantly English lyrics and used exotic instrumentation such as steel guitars and ukuleles to give the music a romantic flavor. *Hapa haole music* was popularized on the mainland by phonograph records and radio programming. Beginning in 1935 Harry Owens (and a series of successors) broadcast “Hawaiian” music from Honolulu as part of a show called “Hawaii Calls.” The program was beamed to the West Coast of the United States by shortwave and relayed by the networks throughout the nation where it had a large following.

³¹Glenn K.S. Man, “Hollywood Images of the Pacific,” in *East-West Film Journal* 5 (July 1991): 16.

This South Seas heritage served as a starting point for Rodgers and Hammerstein in their creation of a musical from Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*. One can sense traces of it in the song "Bali Ha'i," both in its lyrics and in its romantic melody which, although not using such instrumentation, invokes the seductive sound of steel guitars.

All these elements were part of the touristic appeal of the South Sea islands and could be found in posters, brochures, and magazine articles in which text and illustrations supported each other and served as a magnet for their intended audience. Ironically, for the context of this study, one source for this touristic artwork was Don Blandings, a native Oklahoman. In 1916 a performance of "Bird of Paradise," a Broadway musical about Hawaii, influenced him to trade the frontier of the American West for the Pacific frontier of Hawaii. Between the 1920s and 1950s he published numerous examples of sentimental verse and artwork portraying the islands as an exotic paradise. Behind all this touristic discourse was the economic goal of selling romance to the American tourist.³²

An examination of travel magazines published on the eve of World War II demonstrates that the South Seas myth was still very much alive. A primary source for this paradisaical imagery may be found in the full-page advertisements for the Matson Steamship Company that appeared in magazines like *Vogue* and *Travel*. Such an example appeared in the November 1941 issue of *Travel* just a few weeks prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The focus of the advertisement was a photograph of a woman

³²DeSoto Brown, "Beautiful, Romantic Hawaii: How the Fantasy Image Came to Be," in *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* (1994); DeSoto Brown, *Hawaii Recalls: Nostalgic Images of the Hawaiian Islands, 1910-1950* (London: KPI, 1986).

throwing a lei overboard from the deck of a departing ship. She stands in front of a smokestack bearing a large “M,” the symbol for the Matson line beside which is the following text:

Aloha! Back soon, Hawaii! Heartfelt wish of friends leaving and remaining, charmingly expressed in leis, tossed into the wake of departing ships. If the garlands reach shore, the mutual wish will be fulfilled. You will be back soon! To more happy days, as all days are . . . in Hawaii. Your travel agent or Matson Line offices will gladly give you illustrated literature about Hawaii and the South Seas.³³

The sentiment in the text would become ironic in light of subsequent history. It would be at least five years before tourists would return. A further irony lies in the name of the creator. In the upper right hand corner of a white card bearing the text is the name “Steichen.” Edward Steichen, one of America’s greatest photographers of the modern era, made numerous advertising photographs in the late 1930s and 40s when he worked for the J. Walter Thompson Agency and published his work in glossy magazines such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. At the time the picture appeared in the press (late Fall 1941), Steichen was at work on a patriotic exhibition of photographs to be held at New York’s prestigious Museum of Modern Art. The exhibit was to be a portrait of America on the eve of its involvement in a global war for the survival of western democracy. Originally to have been entitled “Panorama of Defense,” after the attack on Pearl Harbor it was retitled “Road to Victory.” It opened for the public in May of 1942.

³³*Travel* (November 1941), inside front cover.

In January 1942, Steichen received a commission from the United States Navy as a Lt. Commander. His assignment was to oversee a naval photographic unit working in the Pacific. A comparison of one of these wartime photographs with the Matson advertisement will demonstrate the evolution of the South Pacific image in the first half of the decade. The photograph was taken by Wayne Miller who was assigned to the Steichen unit. Miller's November 1943 photograph of wounded gunner Kenneth Bratton being lifted from the turret of his torpedo bomber aboard the carrier *Saratoga* provides a stark contrast to the frivolity of the earlier image. The descent from the cross-like composition of the wartime photograph enhances its power to convey the sacrifices being made by Americans in the war-torn Pacific. Travel in that region of the world took on a very different meaning.

During the first half of the 1940s, the idyllic image of the South Seas was tempered by the images of death and destruction from Pearl Harbor to the bloody battles for Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima. To the soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fought long and hard to secure the chain of strategic islands on the road to Japan, the romantic notions of the South Seas idyll were modified by reality. The South Pacific that American servicemen expected was the product of Hollywood and travel agency admen. Their typical expectations have been described by William Manchester in *Goodbye Darkness*, his memoir of his service as a Marine in the Pacific war:

In the view of World War II GIs and Marines, most of what they had heard about the South Seas was applesauce. They had expected an exotic world where hustlers like Sadie Thompson seduced missionaries and mother Goddam strutted through *The Shanghai Gesture*, and wild men

pranced on Borneo, and Lawrence Tibbett bellowed 'On the Road to Mandalay' while sahibs wearing battered topees and stengah-shifters sipped shandies or gin pahits, and lovely native girls dived for pearls wearing fitted sarongs, like Dorothy Lamour. Actually such paradises existed. They always have. Tahiti, forty-six hundred miles east of New Guinea, is one of them. . . . These dreamy islands could have been matched elsewhere in 1942. What young Americans in the early 1940s could not understand was that the local cultures, delicate and ephemeral, could not coexist with engines of death and destruction.³⁴

Manchester later describes the landscape of a typical island battlesite:

Americans at home thought all the island battlefields in the Pacific were pretty much alike: jungly, rainy with deep white beaches ringed by awnings of palm trees. That was true of New Guinea and the Solomons but most of Admiral Nimitz's central Pacific offensive, which opened in the autumn of 1943 was fought over very different ground. Only the palms and pandanus there evoke memories of the South Pacific, and the pandanus do not flourish because rain seldom falls. A typical central Pacific island, straddling the equator, is a small platform of coral, sparsely covered with sand and scrub bush, whose highest point rises no more than a few feet above the surf line.³⁵

Manchester's retrospective description of World War II in the Pacific inverts much of the travel agency copy of the prewar years and attempts to replace myth with reality.

Photojournalism and Travel

World War II transported Americans to far away places where they were introduced to new peoples and cultures. *South Pacific*'s Nellie Forbush is representative

³⁴William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1980), 101.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 254.

of a wartime American generation who had the opportunity to broaden their awareness of the world. These experiences were important in further developing a modern American touristic imagination.

Even those Americans who stayed at home during World War II were able to enter into this touristic adventure if only from a distance. Norman Rockwell captured this phenomenon in his cover illustration for the April 29, 1944 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Entitled “Armchair General,” it depicts a cigar-smoking grey-haired gentleman seated in his living room listening attentively to a radio for the latest news of the War. Behind the radio is a wall map of Europe. He holds several maps on his lap while others are strewn on the floor. There are also newspapers with headlines about plans for an Allied invasion of France.

Eric Sandeen has suggested that during World War II the popular media helped promote a touristic attitude among the American middle class public. It was this public that would form the primary audience for the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein. At the center of this touristic point of view was the high profile attained during the war by middle class picture magazines such as *Life*. At its inception in 1936, *Life* announced that its purpose was “to see the world.”³⁶

For *Life* magazine to bring the world to the eyes of the readers, a staff of highly mobile photographers living out of suitcases and duffel bags was absolutely essential. During World War II, *Life* photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White and Robert

³⁶Eric Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 18.

Capa became globetrotting adventurers. American photographers were being asked to record and interpret a worldwide event for their domestic, largely middle class audience. *Life* provided this eye on the world. The magazine set up foreign bureaus across the globe, allowing their photographers to log thousands of miles. The unprecedented mobility of these photographers helped them to capture new and exotic landscapes for such popular magazines as *Life* and *Look*.

The result of this global photojournalism was an “increased curiosity about a world made more understandable by vicarious visual forays.”³⁷ Sandeen has described these wartime photojournalists as “photographer/tourists” who established a pattern that would continue into the postwar world. They showed Americans “how the world looked” by framing it through their photographs. Their work became “A world album [that] accumulated month by month, and then week by week through magazines that brought to readers glimpses beyond their shores.”³⁸ Much of this global photojournalism was optimistic in outlook. *National Geographic*, for example, “brought the world to middle-class audiences in a pragmatic and unproblematic way” featuring war-related articles that were timely and “relentlessly cheerful.”³⁹

Established magazines like *Life* and new travel magazines like *Holiday* (started in 1946) kept their photographers on the road after the war. The readership of these

³⁷Ibid., 19.

³⁸Ibid., 18.

³⁹Ibid., 14.

magazines, “with a curiosity bolstered by affluence and the mantle of world leadership, eagerly followed.”⁴⁰ Sandeen suggests an important link between the World War II photographer and postwar travel:

After the war, the world begged to be revisited, both by photographers and *vicariously* by veterans and their families, who had not had the chance to enjoy the ambience of Manila or Rome or Paris the first time around. Finally there was a broader purpose to wanting to *know about the rest of the world*, for the United States had emerged from the Second World War as a preeminent power.⁴¹ [my emphases]

The ability to see the world so easily gave Americans a sense of mastery over their shrinking globe. Magazines such as *Life* and *National Geographic* had empowered their photographers to “capture the world” for their middle class audiences.

A significant development in the distribution of global images in the postwar environment occurred with the establishment of Magnum, the independent picture agency, by Robert Capa and four other international photographers in 1947. The agency marketed global images to a number of American publications.

For twelve months between 1948 and 1949, a collection of Magnum photographs appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* as part of a series entitled “People Are People the World Over.” Conceived by Robert Capa, “People” portrayed the daily lives of farm families from twelve different nations. Each monthly two-page installment featured each family engaged in a similar activity such as eating, shopping, traveling, or studying. The

⁴⁰Ibid., 3.

⁴¹Ibid., 14.

series helped establish in the minds of the public the relationship between American culture and the rest of the world. The Magnum photographers were staking out and marketing the world to a middle class audience.

The ideological and economic implications of such magazine photo-essays has been outlined by Sandeen demonstrating the connection between the touristic imagination and a society of consumers and leisure-time activities:

The Magnum-inspired 'People Are People' series shows the linkage between the production of images and the emerging postwar order. The pictures were thrown into the commerce of domestic consumption. They were framed by advertisements appealing to appetites that were increasingly indulged and were accompanied by articles that interpreted the culture of affluence. Images also brought the world to the magazine reader without the frenetic context of World War II. More than that, picturing everyday life, both in the United States and abroad, became one more way in which America laid claim to world dominion. The eye of the photographer and the layout of the editor reinforced the deceptively simple ideology of the victors. Finally, these pictures became part of an American projection abroad that included both marketing and foreign policy objectives, the two often intertwined.⁴²

Postwar Edens

Despite the horrors of World War II, the American Dream of a Paradise continued into the postwar era. Curly and Laurey and Nellie and Emile were hopeful about their future and served as models for couples setting out on the road of matrimony and family in the last half of the 1940s. The postwar travel magazines picked up the quest for

⁴²Ibid., 25-26.

paradise. For instance, the October 1948 issue contained an article by Jerome Weidman extolling the virtues of Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*. The central element of the book, according to Weidman, was its "picture of the ideal existence we all dream about." Weidman discusses the story in the context of the postwar expectations of a group of GIs that he knew in Europe during the war. In essence they were all looking for a postwar prescription for paradise:

There was a common denominator in Captain Ratcliffe's desire for a car and Major Hull's yearning for a job that would give him four months to a half year in the country, a readily recognizable strain that runs through all of us and to which we all respond. It is the secret, hankering for the ideal, for the thing we do not have, the itch for what Henry James, in a superb short story of that title has called 'The Great Good Place,' the place which somehow, always seems to be over the horizon of time or distance. It is the small buzz of restlessness that is part of every one of us, the unquiet quest that makes us save travel folders . . . and keeps alive decade after decade, books like *The Swiss Family Robinson*.⁴³

For Weidman and many other readers, young and old, Wyss's novel presents a tidy world completely under the control of the Swiss family cast upon the shores of an unnamed Pacific island. Here they are able to solve all the problems that come their way and create a utopian existence that each reader wishes to share. It is the ideal book for the armchair traveler:

⁴³Jerome Weidman, "Good Reading: Seventh in a Series of Selections from Travel Writing He Has Liked," *Holiday*, October 1948, 77.

It is like being under your own roof and yet, at the same time, having available to you a boundless range of field, forest, and sea, and every harmless delight of them.⁴⁴

You keep wishing, as you read, that you were there with them, helping out and having some of the fun they are enjoying with such innocent thoroughness.⁴⁵

The “Great Good Place” of *The Swiss Family Robinson*’s South Seas paradise was also to be found in the touristic musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein such as *South Pacific*.

Articles and advertisements in postwar travel magazines such as *Holiday* also reflected America’s growing interest in the real as well as the fictional Pacific. In 1949 (the year *South Pacific* premiered), American President [steamship] Lines ran advertisements inviting Americans to “Cruise the Summer Zone to the fascinating ports of the Orient”:

Life at sea is a wonderful world of its own--a world apart you’ll meet interesting people and make new friends as you cruise the warm Pacific to Hawaii, the Philippines, China, and Japan.⁴⁶

The sentiments expressed in this touristic discourse echo Nellie Forbush’s remarks to Emile de Becque. Nellie, like the tourists addressed in the ad, “wanted to see what the world was like outside Little Rock” and “wanted to meet different kinds of people and find out if I liked them better.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶*Holiday*, April 1949, 143.

⁴⁷Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 276.

In 1949 the Matson Steamship Line ran a series of advertisements in *Holiday* and *Vogue* inviting tourists to travel to postwar Hawaii. Each ad featured a romantic couple on the deck of the ship reminiscent of Emile and Nellie as they appear on the terrace of his plantation in the opening moments of *South Pacific*. Romance links the couple and the sights they will see:

Golden hours under the sparkling Pacific sun bring a new sense of peace . . . discover a new life . . . vibrant, gay, relaxed . . . A new world awaits you . . . brilliant, restful, exciting . . . Always ahead wait the islands, like a gift unopened . . . for you. In flower-fragrant Hawaii, you'll discover a gentle, easy life . . . as peaceful as the wash of the Pacific on coral sands.⁴⁸

This advertising copy brings to mind the sentiments expressed in songs such as "Some Enchanted Evening," "Happy Talk," and especially "Bali Ha'i":

Bali Ha'i
May call you,
Any night, any day
In your heart
You'll hear it call you
'Come away, come away.'"

. . .

Some day, you'll see me,
Floatin' in de sunshine,
My head stickin' out
F'um a low-flyin' cloud.
You'll hear me call you,
Singin' through de sunshine,
Sweet and clear as can be.
'Come to me,

⁴⁸*Holiday*, March 1949, 94; *Vogue*, 15 April 1949, 115.

Here am I,
Come to me, come to me!⁴⁹

Many Americans viewed the former wartorn Pacific as a site for future touristic development. A letter to *Holiday* suggested that General MacArthur's former headquarters in New Guinea could become a favorite attraction "for air tourists in the postwar travel scheme." The writer called upon some hotel executive "to build a modern resort in the midst of eerie New Guinea."⁵⁰

A month later J. Frank Beaman, the editor of *Holiday*, suggested an important relationship between postwar tourism and American economic development overseas:

The Department of Commerce has become interested in tourism and has recently established a special bureau to promote it. One of the Department's principal functions is promoting America's foreign trade. Most foreign countries in the postwar world lack the cash to buy American goods. And foreign travel is about as painless and profitable way of greasing these wheels of foreign trade as can be imagined.⁵¹

Luther Billis, *South Pacific*'s Seabee capitalist, was a master of greasing wheels in his attempts to outmaneuver and outsell Bloody Mary and her island souvenir makers. Real life postwar American business men would span the globe looking for similar economic opportunities on a grander scale.

⁴⁹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 294-295.

⁵⁰*Holiday*, May 1946, 122.

⁵¹*Holiday*, June 1946, 21.

Postwar Americans Abroad

World War II had a major impact upon American travel abroad. This global conflict hastened and enhanced the development of transportation between faraway points. During the later stages of the war, articles appeared extolling the promise of improved travel and tourism in the postwar world. A typical example of this discourse appeared in the April 1944 issue of *Travel*:

This global war is pioneering a system of earth-circling airways and airfields from Trinidad to Khartoum and from Seattle to Chunking. These myriad airlines--now devoted to the grim business of war--will be the routes over which Tomorrow's Magic Carpet will fly.⁵²

The author, Carol Hall, predicted a "coming world invasion by air." Technology was in the process of shrinking the globe and once distant cities such as Bombay, Sydney, and Calcutta would be as easy to reach as American cities were by rail.

Americans from all forty-eight states would journey to see a multitude of new places and meet "all kinds of new people" just as Nellie Forbush had done when she traveled to the South Pacific during World War II. Contact with new cultures had jarred the traditional and conservative foundations of Nellie's Arkansas background and in turn impacted the local inhabitants like the Tonkinese Bloody Mary and her daughter Liat. Hall refers to the "problems that will arise (and are now so doing!) in every field of human relations--political, cultural, geographical, commercial."⁵³ She describes the

⁵²Carol C. Hall, "Tomorrow's Magic Carpet," *Travel*, April 1944, 27.

⁵³*Ibid.*

impact of wartime technology on the peoples of Africa and Latin America. The results have been rapid modernization and the creation of new desires among the local populations. During the war individuals such as Bloody Mary attempted to become part of the Western economic process through the sale of souvenirs and crafts to the Americans stationed on the island. Hall indicates that the influx of Americans was having a profound impact:

All this change is affecting native arts. . . . How rapidly the distinctive native arts and cultures will disappear is a matter of speculation. Will standardization of culture be the price paid for improved sanitation, education, transportation, better world relations?⁵⁴

By 1949 approximately 1,500,000 Americans were going abroad each year. *Travel* magazine included an article in its May issue of that year entitled "How to be an American Abroad" written by George Kent. The article presented a list of dos and don'ts for potential Nellie Forbushs on their way overseas. A major concern was the image of America and Americans created abroad and its geopolitical consequences. Each traveler or tourist was an "individual walky talky exhibit of America."⁵⁵ To aid American overseas travelers, the State Department issued its own booklet entitled *Information for Bearers of Passports* which is quoted in the article:

As we act, so are we judged. Tourists who assume an air of arrogance or transcend the common bounds of decency in human conduct can do more in the course of an hour to break down the elements of friendly approach between

⁵⁴Hall, "Tomorrow's Magic Carpet," 29.

⁵⁵George Kent, "How to Be an American Abroad," *Travel* (May 1949), 10.

peoples than the government can do in the course of a year in trying to stimulate friendly relations.⁵⁶

Among the sensitive issues discussed is the “American lust for souvenirs” which often “smudges our good name.” Kent refers to examples of theft and defacement that have left behind a negative image of Americans. In *South Pacific*, which had opened a month earlier, the American lust for souvenirs serves as the basis of conflict between Bloody Mary and the Seabees. Luther Billis’s desire to obtain the sacred boar’s tooth from the island of Bali Ha’i ignores its importance to the island’s native population. Billis’s economic imperative takes precedence over spiritual necessity.

“Victory Gardens”

Oklahoma! and *South Pacific* were in tune with the touristic landscapes that appealed to Americans after World War II. The American landscape became a symbol of patriotism and pride. Deborah Bright discussed the role of the American touristic landscape in “Victory Gardens: The Public Landscape of Postwar America.” According to Bright, the American landscape acted as “an accommodating refuge from [Americans] collective psychic fears.” In this milieu landscape became an expression of “what it meant to be an American in a dark, godless and threatening world.”⁵⁷ It is in such a context that the popularity of *Oklahoma!* and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s other Americana musicals may be better understood.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Deborah Bright, “Victory Gardens: The Public Landscape of Postwar America,” in *Views* (Winter 1990): 3-9, 22-23.

Oklahoma! was especially appropriate for an era seeking to resuscitate the myth of the American frontier. This renaissance of frontier thought meshed perfectly with America's new mantle of postwar leadership of the West. In this environment the American West blended into the broader conception of American hegemony in the world. During this time, the American West and its landscapes were tapped as a source of inspiration and confirmation of America's role in a troubled world.

A musical like *Oklahoma!* helped Americans return to the positive image provided by the nineteenth century West. According to Bright, that West had helped to provide Americans with the appropriate myths of the uniqueness of the American character: rugged individualism, God-fearing values, democracy, and the spirit of free enterprise. Such ideas took on international importance as postwar Americans began to renew their belief in the American mission of global Manifest Destiny. Bright suggests that during these years, the American landscape bore "witness to our fitness as a nation to lead the world and show the tired, humbled, war-torn states of Europe irrefutable evidence of our superior 'native gifts'."⁵⁸

Oklahoma!'s upbeat vision was in agreement with the attitude described in the 1947 picture book, *Look at America: The Country You Know and Don't Know*:

As the frontier advanced, the frontier attitude--bold openhanded, friendly, on the whole optimistic, democratic, hospitable, courteous--became ingrained in our national temperament.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹Ibid.

This frontier attitude also played an important part in linking the postwar phenomenon of consumption with the interest in the touristic landscape. Bright agrees with historian Frederick Jackson Turner that the frontier West was a major factor in shaping the American character. According to her, the frontier-based national character is predominantly white, male, acquisitive, and protocapitalist. This observation surely describes *Oklahoma!*'s Curly McLain who, by the time of *South Pacific*, has been transformed into Luther Billis. These two characters, with their surreys and boar's tooth bracelets, summarize the pent-up American desire to consume and spend in the postwar world.

The American character assumed a decidedly corporate persona in the latter half of the 1940s. This corporate mentality led to a proclivity to exploit the resources of the land. Nature was viewed from a functional perspective. It could be packaged for tourist consumption or utilized for its raw materials. This postwar sense of exploiting the land and its resources is suggested in *Oklahoma!*'s finale:

Brand-new state
 Gonna treat you great!
 Gonna give you barley.
 Carrots and pertaters--
 Pasture fer cattle--
 Spinach and termayters!
 Plen'y of air and plen'y of room--
 Plen'y of room to swing a rope,
 Plen'y of heart and plen'y of hope.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 75-76.

The travel books of the postwar era promoted development and access to the land by businessmen and the growing tourist industries. The pent-up desire to travel was abetted not only by travel books and new magazines like *Holiday* but also by the expansion of the American automobile industry and related support services such as motels, service stations and an impressive interstate highway system. Oil companies like Standard Oil helped to promote the American West through a series of picture-folders of color photographs and text describing the wonders and sights of the region. These were sold at service stations throughout the country.

All of these developments played an important role in the creation of a postwar tourist boom. In this period the tourist industry helped pave the way for American economic development at home and abroad. The touristic discourse of postwar travel books and magazines appealed to the values of white middle-class consumers. This group was looking for simple reassurances in a complicated world. The vicarious touristic experience of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals like *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* accommodated.

CHAPTER 4

A TOLERANT PARADISE: FROM A NATIONAL TO A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

Introduction

World War II set Americans in motion. Migration and travel became a way of life for both civilian and military personnel. The needs and logistics of the war effort were behind this new mobility. Extensive travel occurred both at home and abroad. During this time Americans from all walks of life and areas of the nation converged in strange new situations. The labor essential to the war fueled migration to defense plants in the American North and West. There was an exodus of African Americans and white southerners to the urban North. Okies and Arkies continued moving to the West Coast still seeking the promised land of California, this time as “defense Okies” rather than Dust Bowl refugees. Many New Englanders and Midwesterners found themselves rubbing shoulders in Army training centers in the American South and Southwest. We have already seen how this exchange of populations led to the rising popularity of “hillbilly” music as a nationwide phenomenon during World War II. In this era the regional music took on a new national respectability, eventually being rechristened as “Country and Western.” The mingling of populations during these years led to various forms of cultural miscegenation. For instance, Rock ‘n’ Roll combined elements of black and country music from which a significant new form would emerge and dominate popular musical taste in the postwar decades.

During the 1940s, America would move from a regional to a national culture. The demands of the world crisis required a rethinking of previous views of American identity. The nature of that identity on the eve of American involvement in World War II has been described by Beth Bailey and David Farber:

First, to 1940s Americans, region was crucial. It is hard to appreciate the degree of hatred many southerners still felt at that time toward 'damn yankees,' or how impossibly alien a Brooklyn kid was then to a farm boy from Iowa. There was no bicoastal culture. Harlem was a vast difference from rural Georgia; Texas was a world away from Minnesota; California, equally remote from both. Many of the people set in motion by the war had never traveled to another part of the country. . . .

Even though radio and mass-circulation magazines and the increasing ease of train and automobile travel had done much to vitiate regional boundaries, for most Americans local origin was still an essential part of one's identity. Most people looked at people from other regions with suspicion, if not hostility. . . . People from different regions could often not read each other's backgrounds or even their intentional signals.¹

World War II became a turning point in diverse regional and population unification. The national war effort stressed community cooperation with focus on the group rather than on the individual. The mass media, through films such as *Casablanca* (1943) and *Sahara* (with its multicultural tank crew), championed the group and its political equivalent democracy.

¹Beth Bailey and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 20-21.

Americans were told to sublimate self to the whole. The ultimate goal was national unity among the country's diverse populations. Ironically, even the Japanese Americans in Manzanar and other internment camps were encouraged to participate in activities and programs that reaffirmed a sense of community. One technique the government recommended was group singing. The emphasis on harmony through music may account for the popularity of both film and stage musicals during the war, many with obvious political overtones such as *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942) and Irving Berlin's *This Is the Army* (1943). In 1942 the Works Progress Administration, which had played such an important role in Roosevelt's New Deal cultural strategy, staged a patriotic musical review entitled *Let Freedom Ring*. One of the songs in the performance was "The House I Live In" written by Earl Robinson, an American composer with ties to the Left. The song attempted to answer the question "What is America to me?" The list of answers included "the people I meet," their varied occupations, and "all races, all religions, that's America to me." The song emphasized the richness and diversity of Americans and their common democratic bond.² It is in the context of the search for commonality and community that first *Oklahoma!* and then *South Pacific* must be considered.

"The Farmer and the Cowman"

Oklahoma! provides a classic example of the search for cooperation and community and the resolution of difference. To argue this discourse within territory intimately familiar to their audience, Rodgers and Hammerstein selected a well-known

²"The House I Live In," *Paul Robeson: Ballard for Americans*, Vanguard VCD 117-118.

Don't treat him like a louse,
Make him welcome in yer house. . . .⁴

It is significant that the number is sung during a square dance at the box social held to raise money to build a school for the community. The fact that these two groups have come together to fund an institution symbolic of the coming of civilization to the frontier is an important moment in the musical's narrative. There is even a hint that in the ritual dancing and the mutual enjoyment of the music the farmers and cowmen might be able to achieve harmony:

Territory folks should stick together.
Territory folks should all be pals.
Cowboys dance with the farmers' daughters!
Farmers, dance with the ranchers' gals!⁵

The union of these disparate groups is reminiscent of the mixed backgrounds found among American soldiers in combat films made during World War II. In such films one might find a unit composed of a Catholic, a Jew, an Italian American, an Hispanic, a Texan, and an African American. In reality, however, the American military was a segregated institution throughout the war.

The last part of the song is a lesson in tolerance. Ike Skidmore, the farmer hosting the party, says:

And when this territory is a state,
And jines the union jist like all the others,
The farmer and the cowman and the merchant

⁴Ibid., 53.

⁵Ibid., 52.

Must all behave theirselves and act like *brothers* [my emphasis].⁶

It is left to Aunt Eller, who serves as a repository of folk wisdom throughout the play, to offer the final lesson in brotherhood:

I'd like to teach you all a little sayin'. . . .
And learn these words by heart the way you should:
'I don't say I'm no better than anybody else.
But I'll be damned if I ain't jist as good!'⁷

In order to deal with the diverse populations brought together by the war, the federal government, like Aunt Eller lecturing her neighbors, "used wartime powers to force Americans to put their common interest above the differences that otherwise divided them."⁸

Placing "The Farmer and the Cowman" in such a central portion of the musical served several purposes. First, it was central to the narrative leading to the marriage of Curly and Laurey who represent the two different groups of the cowman and the farmer. The couple's wedding, therefore, serves as a resolution of the plot and the symbolic

⁶Ibid., 54.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Bailey and Farber, *First Strange Place*, 7. "The Farmer and the Cowman" bears an interesting relationship to a 1944 folk song recorded by Pete Seeger and the Union Boys entitled "The Martins and Coys." The song was used in a wartime radio play written by Alan and Beth Lomax. "The Martins and Coys," which tells the story of two feudin' and fightin' mountain families, calls for overcoming past differences to defeat the common enemy. After the war, Lomax asked Oscar Hammerstein II to be a sponsor for People's Songs, Inc., a leftwing organization founded by Pete Seeger to promote the use of music in postwar labor activism. "Martins and Coys," *That's Why We Were Marching: World War II and the American Folk Song Movement*, Smithsonian SF CD 40021, and David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep From Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1981), 121.

establishment of a unified community on the eve of statehood for the Territory. Secondly, it was a message to wartime audiences to pull together and cooperate to defeat the common enemy.

Oklahoma!'s last scene presents the entire community celebrating the marriage of Curly and Laurey and singing the title song of the musical. In this marriage of opposites and communal singing they reaffirm major American goals of the war years.

Race, Prejudice, and Intolerance

The increase in domestic movement during World War II stirred up the American melting pot. Sometimes the pot boiled over, leading to violent conflict as new groups rubbed shoulders. The "Zoot Suit Riots" that exploded in Los Angeles in 1943 exemplified such dissension. The shortage of workers for the West Coast defense industry had led to the influx of Mexicans into California. White people resented not only these Mexicans but the local Hispanics as well. Confrontations between off-duty soldiers and gangs of zoot-suited Hispanic youths led to riots and beatings that lasted for ten days during the month of June. Ironically, the arrival of the Okie and the Arkie migrants during the Dust Bowl of the '30s was responsible for increasing the Los Angeles Hispanic population. These white migrants took away jobs from the Mexican field hands. The Mexicans, forced out of work, went searching in urban areas.

The potential for violence and racial conflict was apparent in John Steinbeck's *Their Blood is Strong* (1938), a nonfiction documentary about migrant workers that provided the background for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In his discussion of the

“foreign” immigrant groups (Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Mexicans) that preceded the Okies in California, Steinbeck sounds a racist and ethnocentric tone:

Foreign labor is on the wane in California, and the future farm workers are to be *white* and *American*. [my emphasis] This fact must be recognized and a rearrangement of the attitude toward and treatment of migrant labor must be achieved.⁹

The same year that saw the opening of the all-white *Oklahoma!* on Broadway and the Los Angeles zoot suit riots also witnessed the outbreak of violence in major American cities, including Detroit and New York, during the hot summer of 1943. Adam Clayton Powell Sr., the Pastor Emeritus of New York’s Abyssinian Baptist Church, explored the causes of these conflicts in *Riots and Ruins* (1945):

The greatest danger to the civilization of the United States is not Germany, Japan, or any other foreign country but the whole vitriolic hate which exists between the white and the colored living within its borders. This hatred is at an all-time high and is mounting higher every day. Millions of Americans trembled in their boots over what they expected would happen on the Second Front in Europe. They also should be suffering from nervous prostration because of what is likely to happen on the home front in the United States when the war is over. It is the longest battle line in the world, stretching from California to Maine. Skirmishes have already occurred all along this line destroying life and property. The newspapers in 1942 and 1943 reported more Negro casualties from racial friction in the United States than casualties in the World War for the same period.¹⁰

⁹Warren French, ed., quoted in *A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 85.

¹⁰Adam Clayton Powell Sr., *Riots and Ruins* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1945), 17.

African Americans and Mexican Americans were not alone in suffering the pains of racism during World War II. Carey McWilliams, a social critic since the 1930s, carried out a study in 1943 for the Institute of Pacific Relations that was subsequently published as *Prejudice: Japanese Americans-Symbols of Racial Intolerance* (1944). McWilliams' study was in response to the internment of West Coast Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Forty thousand Issei (Japanese born abroad and banned from citizenship) and 70,000 Nisei (American-born children of the Issei) were rounded up by government order, forced to relinquish their property, and sent off to "internment camps" such as Manzanar for the duration of the war. The internment, which violated the constitutional rights of these individuals, was the result of Executive Order 9066 signed by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. The government was never able to demonstrate that any of these individuals were traitors or enemy agents. The racial component of this action is evident in the total absence of this type of treatment for German or Italian Americans. McWilliams believed that there was a link between the treatment of the West Coast Japanese and the racial orthodoxy of the Deep South. In both cases, a regional history of racism had led to contemporary problems. California was still suffering from the ideas of a "Yellow Peril" that had dominated white thinking about Asians since the 19th century and had led to various acts of exclusion of both Chinese and Japanese immigrants during the period.

During the war, members of the artistic community responded to this injustice. For example, well-known nature photographer Ansel Adams published *Born Free and Equal: Photographs of the Loyal Japanese Americans at Manzanar Relocation Center*.

Inyo County, California (1944). Adams' purpose was to demonstrate that these Japanese Americans were not dangerous barbarians but productive and patriotic American citizens. The title for a photograph of a young Japanese American is "An American school girl." To further bring home this point, Adams quotes Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior:

Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart;
Americanism is not, and never was a matter of race or
ancestry.¹¹

Interspersed throughout the book are numerous close-up portraits of Japanese Americans. Adams' emphasis upon attractive smiling people may be seen as a means of counteracting the negative image of the Japanese portrayed in American propaganda posters and Hollywood films and cartoons. Instead of the villainous, squinty-eyed, buck-toothed Japanese populating these media, Adams' photographs are of people we would like to get to know. Additionally, by stressing the portrait and the individual physical differences of the faces, he countered the stereotype that the Japanese all look-alike and were a yellow horde of barbarians.

The discrimination suffered by Japanese Americans during the war struck close to home in the case of Oscar Hammerstein II. Oscar's sister-in-law, Eleanor, was married to Jerry Watanabe, an Anglo-Japanese businessman working in New York City. After the war broke out, Jerry was arrested and sent to Ellis Island where he was assigned to a maintenance detail. Jennifer Watanabe, Oscar's niece, was forced to use her mother's

¹¹Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal* (New York: U.S. Camera, 1944), 7.

maiden name (Blanchard) in order to enroll in a Pennsylvania private school during the War.¹²

The climate of prejudice and intolerance manifest in these events led to serious concern on the part of many Americans during the 1940s that the United States was guilty of a racism as nefarious as that being practiced by the enemy. Among the most troublesome examples of American racism was the segregation of the American military during the war and the treatment of African American servicemen and women. Despite some exceptions, such as the Tuskegee airmen who were allowed to fly combat missions in the Mediterranean, most African American troops were placed in noncombat units where they served as cooks, truck drivers, and laborers.

The majority of African American units were led by white officers during the war. Many of these were from the South and brought with them prejudicial attitudes. *Life* photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White discovered these attitudes while accompanying troops during the Mediterranean campaign. In Italy she encountered an all-black ammunition squad under the command of an African American officer. Her companion, a white officer from the South, remarked that, "It makes my blood boil to see a nigger with bars on his shoulders."¹³ Bourke-White's experiences with American intolerance abroad led her to reflect, in 1944, on the deeper meanings of this issue:

¹²Hugh Fordin, *Getting to Know Him: A Biography of Oscar Hammerstein II* (New York: Ungar Publishing Co., 1986), 183-184.

¹³Margaret Bourke-White, *They Called It "Purple Heart Valley": A Combat Chronicle of the War in Italy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 105.

Racial prejudice is an insidious poison. It has been instilled through Germany until it has become one of the contributing factors of a philosophy which led to war. Democratic America must see the relation that this is a common problem. Just because we call ourselves a democracy, it does not mean that we have a natural immunity against the virus of racial injustice.¹⁴

Many African Americans in the military were sent to the Pacific during World War II. Some of these were stationed in the New Hebrides where *South Pacific* takes place. A white Marine Corps officer, writing in the August 1944 issue of *National Geographic* magazine, linked these black troops with the islands' Melanesian inhabitants in a blatantly racist passage in the article:

Upon arrival a contingent of U.S. Negroes, an imaginative Marine spread the word that the newcomers were American Indians fresh from scalping forays on the plains and thirsting for more. It was hours before some of the New Hebridean cannibals could be induced to come within reach of our Negro troops. Within a few weeks, however, amity prevailed. Homesick Negro boys had already adopted the pickaninny mascots from neighboring villages.¹⁵

There were numerous examples of discrimination against black American troops in the South Pacific. Some of these were recorded by Walter White in his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1948). White devoted an entire chapter of his book to the problems of "Jim Crow in the South Pacific," with examples from Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, and other Pacific islands. Such incidents, including the murder of black soldiers by

¹⁴Randall Bond, "Traveler to Arcadia: Margaret Bourke-White in Italy, 1943-1944," quoted in *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 27 (Spring 1992), 107.

¹⁵Robert Heinz, Jr., "Palm Trees and Planes in the New Hebrides," *National Geographic*, August 1944, 247.

whites, provided “a gloomy picture of the treatment accorded Negro troops in the Pacific.”¹⁶ Such patterns of behavior led to cynicism among many black GIs who participated in the war effort:

We know that our battle for democracy will begin when we reach San Francisco on our way home.¹⁷

In 1943, a play dealing with these very issues appeared on Broadway. Prophetically, it was entitled *South Pacific*. Written by Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward, the play focused upon a rebellious black seaman washed ashore onto a Japanese-held island in the Pacific. Aboard ship, the sailor had suffered from the racist antagonism of the ship’s white crew members. As a result, he decides that he can no longer fight for a nation that oppresses him and other people of color. On the Japanese-occupied island, he experiences his first sense of freedom from color prejudice. When he witnesses the callous shooting of a native boy by the Japanese, he realizes that prejudice is universal. Recognizing that he does have a stake in the war, he goes off to battle the enemy. The play’s original title was to have been *New Georgia*, the name of a Pacific island. This title was undoubtedly meant to serve as a link to home front discrimination in the American South.

The link between domestic and global racism was the subject of an article by Alain Locke, an important member of the Harlem Renaissance and a professor at Howard

¹⁶Walter F. White, *A Man Called White* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 293.

¹⁷Ibid.

University, in the November 1942 issue of *Survey Graphic*. Entitled “Color: the Unfinished Business of Democracy,” it was the lead essay in an issue devoted to race problems confronting the United States during and after the war.

For Locke and other African American leaders, color was “the acid test of democracy.” Locke coupled the plight of black Americans with other problems such as Oriental exclusion in the nation’s immigration policies and global anti-semitism. Locke argued that race was America’s greatest dilemma and would have a significant impact on the United States’ bid for world leadership:

A lynching in Mississippi, over and above its enemy echo on a Tokyo short-wave, has as much symbolic meaning in Chunking, Bombay, and Brazzaville as it has tragic reality in the hearts of Negro Americans. Steps taken to abolish second-class citizenship in Florida or to democratize the American army or our war industry have on the other hand, favorable repercussion almost to the ends of the earth. It helps build up not necessarily a democracy of extended political power and domain, but a much more needed democracy full of moral stature, world influence, and world respect. It is such unfinished business, foreign and domestic, that waits on democracy’s calendar today.¹⁸

The wartime writings of two other black leaders echoed Locke’s sentiments and warnings. In 1945 Walter White, the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, published *A Rising Wind* based upon his tour of the global war fronts. In this volume White assays the situation of African American troops

¹⁸Alan Locke, “Color: The Unfinished Business of Democracy,” *Surrey Graphic* 31 (November 1942), 459.

and the plight of the colonial peoples affected by the war. White discovered a dangerous blend of racism and imperialism that was a challenge for American democracy:

A wind is rising--a wind of determination by the have nots of the world to share the benefits of freedom and prosperity which the haves of the earth have tried to keep exclusively for themselves. The wind blows all over the world. Whether that wind develops into a hurricane is a decision which we must make now and in the days when we form the peace.¹⁹

W.E.B. DuBois's *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* appeared in the same year. He, too, was concerned about the fate of colored people chained under colonialism all over the world. The author denounces western ethnocentrism.

The present war has made it clear that we can no longer regard Western Europe and North America as the world for which civilization exists; nor can we look upon European culture as the norm for all peoples. Henceforth the majority of the inhabitants of the earth, who happened to be colored, must be regarded as having the right and the capacity to share in human progress and to become copartners in that democracy which alone can ensure peace among men, by the abolition of poverty, the education of the masses, protection from disease, and the scientific treatment of crime.²⁰

During the War, DuBois, White, and Locke pointed out the links that existed between domestic and global racism. Large contingents of conscripted African Americans fought in a war for global liberation. These were patriots who laid down their lives for

¹⁹Walter F. White, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945), 155.

²⁰W.E.B. DuBois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), v.

others. Shouldn't democratic freedom and opportunity touted by the Allied agenda not include racial equality? This burning feeling motivated the African American community to promote what became known as the "Double V" campaign for victory at home as well as abroad.

Many wartime publications would center around the plight of the United States African American population. These included *To Stem This Tide: A Survey of Racial Tensions in the United States* (1943) by Charles S. Johnson, Roi Ottley's *New World A-coming: Inside Black America* (1943), and Rayford Logan's *What the Negro Wants* (1944) and *The Negro and the Postwar World* (1945).

The most significant wartime publication on African Americans was Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (1944). Myrdal was a Swedish sociologist and economist who conducted a study for the Carnegie Corporation on the social and economic situation of America's black population between 1938 and 1940. Myrdal viewed racism as a case in which the nation had failed to live up to the American Creed "that all men are created equal."

In the same year that Myrdal's study was published, The Council Against Intolerance in America presented an exhibition in New York City entitled *The Negro in American Life*. Subsequently, reproductions of exhibit panels were published in picture book format. The theme of both the exhibition and the book was the contribution made by African Americans to the development of the United States. They also included portrayals of the peoples of China, the Philippines, East Indies, Mexico, West Indies,

South America, Africa, and India with links to the United States. The accompanying text provided an important message for the American public:

The main reason for this book [exhibit] is to make us think--To make us think straight. Our straight thinking has a great deal to do with the welfare of our nation, with our happiness and the happiness of our children. There is no question about the fact that the world is getting smaller as it is knit together by fast travel (airplane) and by fast communication (wireless and radio). What we do at home is no longer secret to the rest of the world.

The peoples of this world are mostly what we call 'colored' (three-quarters of the peoples of the earth are not 'white'). All these people are growing in strength and independence. When we in the United States talk of the four freedoms, all these people look to our treatment of the American Negro to see what we really mean. We have to put our own house in order first. We have to practice what we preach. Then there is a chance of avoiding a third world war. Only then is there a chance for peace on earth.²¹

Red, White and Black

Although not an explicit part of *Oklahoma!*, racial history serves as a backdrop for the region's progress toward statehood. One of the most important facts about the musical is that it is set in Indian Territory. This fact is mentioned in the notes to the musical. It is referred to in "The Farmer and the Cowman" whose plea is that "Territory folks should stick together." In the song these folks are described as "the farmer and the cowman and the merchant." There is no mention made of the Indians who were the original inhabitants of the area. In fact there is no mention whatsoever throughout the musical of the Native

²¹John Leonard Becker, *The Negro in American Life* (New York: J. Messner, Inc., 1944), 52-53.

American population of Oklahoma. It is as if they had never existed. The white population had laid claim to a geographic area that belonged to the redmen. By 1900 when the story takes place, the Indians had been relegated to history and pushed to the margins by a dominant white society. In this context, the words of “Oklahoma,” the final song of the musical, take on a bitter irony as the cowboys and farmers sing:

We know we belong to the land,
And the land we belong to is grand!²²

Such a geopolitical association would surely have come as a great surprise to the natives. Robert Simon, in a review of *Oklahoma!* in a May 1943 issue of *The New Yorker*, hints at such elisions from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical:

Before long . . . a few history professors will drop in for an examination of the Indian Territory details.²³

This “white washing” of Oklahoma history appeared elsewhere in the 1940s. It occurred, for example, in the 1941 edition of the WPA-sponsored publication: *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State*. The fate of this book has been described by Richard Slotkin:

Angie Debo’s [a respected Oklahoma historian] chapter on the history of Oklahoma was suppressed by officials in charge of the project because it took a favorable view of the state’s development under Indian home-rule and gave a devastating account of the way in which Indians had been abused by *Anglo-American proponents of statehood and economic modernization*. [my emphasis] A different text was substituted which asserts that the ‘red thread’ of ‘Indian blood’ made the territorial leadership recalcitrant to progress. ‘Because of this long period of Indian occupation,

²²Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 76.

²³*The New Yorker*, 29 May 1943, 61.

Oklahoma presented for generations the picture of an area of arrested development', and rapid progress became possible only when Whites took power from the Indians on this last 'American frontier.'²⁴

Debo, however, was able to publish her own account of the mistreatment of Oklahoma's native populations in two important books. *And Still the Waters Run* (1940) recounts the nefarious history of the defrauding of the state's indigenous peoples. *The Road to Disappearance* (1941) is the tragic story of the Creek nation. Other volumes published by the University of Oklahoma Press in the early 1940s sounded a similar theme. The subject of Carl Coke Rister's *Land Hunger: David L. Payne and the Oklahoma Boomers* was the displacement of the indigenous inhabitants of Indian Territory by white settlers during the time of the Boomer's land settlement. David Payne had been instrumental in opening these lands to white domination. In *A History of Oklahoma* (1942), Grant Foreman describes the ironic nature of the state's history. Foreman explains that the name Oklahoma is a Choctaw word meaning "the Indian people" or the "Home of the Red Man":

The name thus chosen by the people of the new state . . . directs attention to a wide field of study of her Indians from whom the state derived.²⁵

Foreman indicates the broader context of the state's settlement by noting it was part of the larger process of the Anglo American intrusion into the West that ultimately

²⁴Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 282.

²⁵Grant Foreman, *A History of Oklahoma* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), viii.

led to the destruction of the buffalo and a revolution in the life of the Indian. We must not forget that Curly McLain and Laurey Williams were among those Anglo Americans enjoying the results of the displacement of the Indian population.

Although *Oklahoma!* and its antecedent *Green Grow the Lilacs* are lacking a Native American presence, Lynn Riggs, the author of *Lilacs*, did write a play about the plight of the Oklahoma Indian. Riggs' *Cherokee Night* was written in 1936 during the worst of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl crisis. The play is a dramatic study of the descendants of the Cherokees and what had befallen them in modern times. Darkness and night have descended upon the redman. In the onslaught of modernity they have forgotten their heritage and traditions. The play is rife with examples that show the underside of *Oklahoma!* that remains unspoken throughout the musical. The Dust Bowl has been brought about by the ignorance of the white man:

The grass is withered.
Where the river was is red sand.
Fire eats the timber.
Night--night has come to our people.²⁶

The story takes place over a number of decades. In a scene from 1895 we learn that the once pristine Indian Territory is "plumb full of men with six shooters now--cattle rustlers, desperadoes."²⁷ One of the white characters says to the Cherokee Gray Wolf:

²⁶Lynn Riggs, *Russet Mantle and the Cherokee Night* (New York: Samuel French, 1936), 150.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 251.

You Indians think you must own things out here.
This is God's country out here--and God's a white man.
Don't forget that.²⁸

Gray Wolf is destined to mourn "for a whole race gone down into darkness."²⁹ Ethnic cleansing was moving across the American West. In response some of the Oklahoma Indians attempted to persevere in this negative environment. One explains that:

Civilization crept upon us, forced us out. Back in the 90's we moved to Oklahoma [white territory]. But not to the towns. We had seen the ways of men called Christian. And that is why we preferred the peace of this high mountain.³⁰

During World War II commentators on the problems of contemporary racism and prejudice included Native Americans among those members of the population still suffering from an intolerant society. One of these commentators was Carey McWilliams, a social critic, who tackled the theme of prejudice and the plight of the downtrodden in articles and book-length studies in the 1930s and 1940s. *Brothers Under the Skin* (1943 and 1946) contained a chapter on the "Non-vanishing Indian." For McWilliams, African American slavery and the treatment of the Indian as barbarian or savage were at the center of America's race problems:

Any consideration of colored minorities in the United States must, perforce, start with the American Indian. Apart from historical or chronological considerations, the Indian problem is central to the whole question. It represents not only the point of departure, but the point to which any

²⁸Ibid., 260.

²⁹Ibid., 282.

³⁰Ibid., 224.

discussion of the larger problem must ultimately return. For it was with the Indian that our patterns of 'color-reaction' and 'color-behavior' were first conditioned. So deep-seated and ingrained have these patterns become that it seldom occurs to the average American that a large part of his race psychology might be traced to the experience of his ancestors with Indians on an ever-shifting American frontier.³¹

According to McWilliams, the Indian and his treatment by the white population was at the heart of a national psychosis. Native Americans constituted "a vanishing race . . . doomed to ultimate extinction as collective entities."³² A main form of cultural attack on this group was through land ownership. Ever greater quantities of tribal land were gradually absorbed by white settlers as they moved across the western frontier. This helps to further explain the absence of Native Americans from *Oklahoma!*.

Another group important in Oklahoma history but missing from the musical was the state's black population. In the 1880s during the Boomer land grab of David Payne and his followers, the Federal government sent black cavalymen (the famous "Buffalo soldiers") to maintain order there. On April 29, 1889, 10,000 blacks participated in the famous land rush of the Sooners, claiming land in the former Indian Territory. Between 1890 and 1910, twenty-five black communities with a total population of 137,000 had been established in Oklahoma. The primary source for this population were blacks fleeing oppression in the South. The black flight to Oklahoma was a response to white racism. In the 1890s African Americans participated in a nationalist movement that sought escape to

³¹Carey McWilliams, *Brothers Under the Skin* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1946), 51.

³²*Ibid.*, 57.

Africa or Oklahoma where they hoped to live out a dream of freedom from white control.

A letter of 1891 demonstrates this hope:

We as a people are oppressed and disenfranchised we are still working hard and our rights taken from us times are hard and getting harder every year as a people believe that Africa is the place but to get from under bondage we are thinking of Oklahoma as this is our nearest place of safety (sic).³³

The communities established by blacks in Oklahoma were segregated towns. The nature of these towns is described in a poem commemorating Boley, Oklahoma:

Boley Recalled in Song:
 'Say, have you heard the story,
 Of a little colored town,
 Way over in the Nation
 On such a lovely sloping ground?
 With as pretty little houses
 As you ever chanced to meet,
 With not a thing but colored folks
 A-standing in the streets?
 Oh, 'tis a pretty country
 And the Negroes own it, too
 With not a single white man here
 To tell us what to do--in Boley.'
 Uncle Jesse, town poet³⁴

Unfortunately, beginning in the 1890s, prejudice and violence threatened black rights in Oklahoma. Many were ordered out of their communities by the white majority. As a result, Oklahoma blacks joined forces with African Americans from the neighboring

³³A.G. Belton quoted in William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, Inc., 1987), 250.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 251.

state of Arkansas to migrate to Africa. Bishop Henry Turner who urged such migration summed up the situation:

There is no manhood future in the United States for the Negro. He may eke out an existence for generations to come, but he can never be a man--full, symmetrical and undwarfed.³⁵

The situation for African Americans worsened with the approach of Oklahoma statehood so eagerly anticipated by the characters in the musical. With statehood came the disenfranchisement of blacks and the passage of a number of Jim Crow laws. The black dream of Oklahoma had become part of the nightmare of the American South. Perhaps it is significant that in 1943, while *Oklahoma!* was wowing Broadway audiences, Oscar Hammerstein II also wrote and produced on the New York stage *Carmen Jones*, an updated version of Bizet's *Carmen* set in the American South of the 1940s and featuring an all black cast. Wartime visitors to New York City had the "separate but equal" opportunity to witness the white and black experience in twentieth century America portrayed in two different musicals on Broadway.

There is one other aspect of tolerance that must be considered in our examination of *Oklahoma!*: that of the attitude of the rest of the nation to the Oklahomans. During the era of the Dust Bowl migrations of the 1930s, the dispossessed Oklahoma farmers and their families became part of a negative stereotyped image: the migrant "Okie," dirty, ragged, and hungry, headed for the "promised land" of California with family members and possessions crammed gypsy style into a dilapidated truck or automobile. Along the

³⁵Ibid., 254.

route they endured the hatred and disgust of the local people who attacked their camps and tried to run them out of town. In the 1930s it was not uncommon to see signs reading “NO OKIES!” During World War II many of the migrant Okies worked in California defense plants. Richard Polenberg has noted the bitter nature of the relationship that developed between older residents and the “defense Okies”:

Above an obvious passageway someone wrote in chalk, ‘Okie, this is a door’; and above a urinal, ‘Okie drinking fountain.’³⁶

The Okie became such a stereotype that Dust Bowl refugees from Texas, Arkansas, or Missouri were all labeled as Okies.

Audiences attending performances of *Oklahoma!* in the 1940s would have had memories of the photographs of downtrodden Okies taken by Dorothea Lange and other photographers of the Farm Security Administration in the mid 1930s. They would have read John Steinbeck’s descriptions of the Okies in his best-selling novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Following close upon the heels of this literary sensation was director John Ford’s cinematic adaptation starring Henry Fonda. Ford carefully studied the FSA photographs and many of the film’s scenes are derived from this source. Through this musical, Rodgers and Hammerstein purported to overcome these negative images. How this was accomplished will be discussed in Chapter 5.

³⁶Richard Polenberg, ed., *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States Since 1938* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 67.

"To meet different kinds of people . . ."

The global nature of the conflict that was World War II perforce brought Americans into contact with many exotic peoples. Although set in America, *Oklahoma!* alluded to America's widening horizons. The character of Ali Hakim demonstrates this distinction. He is the exotic foreigner in the midst of a white American community. Ali Hakim is a Persian (i.e., Iranian) from the Middle East. He represents cultural difference to the local inhabitants who are the customers for the goods he peddles. During his romantic flirtation with Ado Annie, he points out that back home in his native Persia, his brother is allowed to have six wives; in the United States he would be charged with bigamy. When he ultimately breaks off his relationship with Ado Annie, Ali gives her a passionate kiss which he describes as a "Persian Goodbye." Will Parker, Annie's "fiancé," is upset by these carryings on and vigorously protests. In *Oklahoma!* Will Parker represents the American innocent coming into contact with new sights and customs as catalogued in "Kansas City," his character-defining song. His encounter with Ali Hakim further expands on this theme. For Will, Kansas City was a strange and exotic place. Ali Hakim provided Will's first contact with the foreigner and an alternative culture.

A War Between the Races

Racism and intolerance were major factors in World War II. The two most horrific events of that war carry an important racial component. The Holocaust stands as a lasting reminder of the anti-Semitism prevalent before, during, and after the war. The

selection of Japan rather than Germany as the site of the first tactical use of the atomic bomb is also fraught with racial overtones. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* participated in the discourse of racism and tolerance generated by the events of the decade. Specifically, it tapped into Western attitudes towards Asian and Pacific peoples.

The racial dimensions of the Pacific war have been treated by historians John Dower and Christopher Thorne. Dower's *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986) reviews the propaganda war on both sides in which posters, comics, cartoons, and films were used to stereotype and ridicule the enemy.³⁷ Western prejudice toward Asians was frequently based upon outmoded anthropological concepts and social Darwinian ideas of progress and evolution. American propaganda portrayed the Japanese as insects, monkeys, or vermin. American GIs often used derogatory language to refer to America's Asian allies. Frank Capra, master filmmaker of populist Americana, produced *Know Your Enemy Japan*, a compilation of the English-speaking world's dominant clichés about the Japanese. Such virulent anti-Japanese propaganda established a climate of fear, hate, and prejudice that carried over into the postwar period.

British historian Christopher Thorne also used a dual perspective in examining the racial aspects of the Pacific war.³⁸ Thorne begins in the 1930s when the Japanese had embarked upon a campaign centering around the concept of "Asia for Asiatics." This was

³⁷John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

³⁸Christopher Thorne, "American Political Culture and the Asian Frontier, 1943-1973," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 72 (1986), 339-394.

meant to be a challenge to white power in the Far East and the Pacific where it found a sympathetic audience. Ultimately, it implied the revolt of Asia against the white man, the end of Western invincibility, and the beginnings of the Asian struggle for emancipation. The rapid spread of Japanese power in the Pacific was a blow to western prestige and white superiority. The West was made to look effete to the native populations that were under its control. In response, the Western powers tried frantically to sustain Anglo-Saxonism in the Western Pacific, the Far East, and India. The colonial powers such as Britain and France wished to maintain their rule over the technologically less-developed brown and yellow races of that part of the world. Japanese victories encouraged Pan-Asian and Pan-colored movements that openly espoused resentment of Western domination which had been characterized by a combination of racial superiority and economic exploitation. A global consciousness of color was developing, and many viewed the war as a racial war between whites and people of color. The dangers facing the world were outlined by Walter White, the Executive Secretary of the NAACP:

If this war should end with the continuation of white overlordship over brown, yellow, and black peoples of the world, there will inevitably be another war and continued misery for the colored peoples of the United States, the West Indies, South America, Africa, and the Pacific.³⁹

The racism of the Western powers in the Pacific war had important implications for the postwar decades. In this context, *South Pacific* may be seen as a warning to Americans about their new power in the region and their responsibility as the leader of

³⁹Ibid.

the free world. Subsequent history would show that these warnings were often ignored at the nation's expense.

Throughout the war a steady stream of American military personnel were shipped to new and exotic locations. For Americans like Nellie Forbush and Joe Cable who were heading to the Pacific theater, there usually was a preliminary stopover in the Hawaiian islands. For them, Hawaii represented what Beth Bailey and David Farber described as "the first strange place."⁴⁰ Here they were confronted by a multiracial society which, for many, was their first experience with a large non-white population. Hawaii became the edge of the Pacific frontier for these Americans. Here thousands of American military personnel (male and female, black and white) participated in the "prehistory of our understanding of difference."⁴¹ Hawaii provided them with a mixture of racial and ethnic groups unlike anywhere else in America. The Americans arriving there in the 1940s brought with them a combination of Hollywood and touristic inspired notions of this "Paradise of the Pacific":

American troops sent overseas by the thousands to the world's far flung fronts are receiving mass doses of disillusion, and getting rid of notions built up in American minds by the movies. Here in the Pacific they have learned that the sun is very hot, the rain very wet, the natives often as dark and ugly as brown and beautiful. . . .⁴²

⁴⁰Beth Bailey and David Farber, *The First Strange Place: Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 18.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 56.

A focal point for cultural contact for Americans in Hawaii was Honolulu's infamous Hotel Street district where off-duty soldiers and sailors lined up to patronize the area's brothels. Here they found the islands' equivalent to *Oklahoma!*'s Kansas City. One of those with memories of this experience was Kenneth Burch, an Oklahoma farm boy. Burch, like the musical's Will Parker, was "dazzled by the scene. To him it was like a foreign country, another world."⁴³ Burch, like so many Americans sent to the four corners of the world, found his own Kansas City of difference. These Americans would return home with an enhanced awareness of difference:

Hawaii was a place of extremes, and those extremes reveal the tensions of the time and the possibilities it promised for the future. The ways in which the peoples of Hawaii and the men and women from the mainland made sense of one another, became friends, became lovers, speaks to the possibilities realized and unrealized in the new America that was born in World War II.⁴⁴

While racism and prejudice were only implicit in *Oklahoma!*, they were foregrounded in *South Pacific*. The two love stories that provide the main narrative of the musical become more significant by their incorporation of a racial dimension. James Michener, in his *Tales of the South Pacific*, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, in their musical transformation of the *Tales*, explored a daring theme missing from most fiction written about the war in the 1940s.

⁴³Ibid., 96.

⁴⁴Ibid., 29.

The area of the world encompassed by *South Pacific* was a polyvalent society characterized by a broad range of racial types. Among the theaters of war visited by the American GI, this was the most diverse. The New Hebrides where the action of the play is set included white Europeans, yellow-skinned Chinese and Tonkinese, brown-skinned Polynesians, and black Melanesians, the predominant racial group in the area. In the musical the primary characters are white Americans and Europeans and Tonkinese Asians. Except for a brief reference by Emile de Becque to his black friends Basile and Donato, who will help in the coastwatching mission, Melanesians are absent from the musical. This absence parallels the absence of Native Americans from *Oklahoma!*

Although the black Melanesians have been marginalized in *South Pacific*, we can gain some notion of their effect on the white Americans arriving on the island from the "Fo' Dolla" chapter of Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* which provided the basic plot of the musical's secondary love story between Lt. Cable and Bloody Mary's daughter Liat. In the chapter a group of soldiers and sailors discuss the differences among the island's non-white inhabitants: Melanesians, Polynesians, and Tonkinese. They decide that the brown-skinned Polynesians are the most acceptable. All agree that they would find it difficult to romance the frizzy-haired Melanesians. These black women are used to debunk the myths of the South Seas. Hollywood is blamed for creating the misconception that the islands were filled with Dorothy Lamour look-alikes. One GI sends his American girlfriend a snapshot of a Melanesian woman with "frizzed hair, sagging breasts, and

buttocks like a Colorado mesa” to dispel the notion that he is frolicking with gorgeous “vahines” in a tropical Paradise.⁴⁵

The response of white soldiers and sailors to the Melanesians they met in the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands appeared in popular publications at home and abroad. Much of this imagery was in the form of stereotypical cartoons in civilian magazines such as *The New Yorker* or mass-circulation military examples such as *Yank*. Many of these were “cannibal” type cartoons showing fuzzy-headed natives adorned with bone decorations standing around large iron cooking pots. Some of these cartoons made their point at the expense of the natives by contrasting white and black cultures in a negative fashion. The cover of the June 2, 1945 issue of *The New Yorker* shows a Nellie Forbush-type nurse or WAC on a Pacific island putting her hair in curlers while three native women curiously watch this western ritual. The natives are caricatures, portrayed as blacks with large protruding lips and bulging white eyes. They are wearing bright-colored sarongs and necklaces and bracelets made of bone. The central figure is smoking a corn cob pipe. Western and South Seas canons of beauty are sharply contrasted at the expense of the islanders who appear to be attempting to learn Western secrets of beauty.

Another cartoon from the December 18, 1943 issue of *The New Yorker* shows an outdoor movie theater set up to entertain the military personnel on a typical Pacific island. The attention of the soldiers in the audience is focused on the movie screen which depicts the Hollywood image of the South Seas maiden: tan complexion, long dark hair

⁴⁵James A. Michener, *Tales of the South Pacific* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 193-194.

adorned with tropical flowers, and wearing a “Dorothy Lamour style” sarong. She is being romanced by a young white soldier. Behind the audience stands a cluster of black-skinned and corpulent native women whose appearance is in stark contrast to the cinematic fantasies of the GIs. These native women, like their “sisters” in the previous cartoon, are mesmerized by the ideal that they see projected on the screen.

A third example of this type of imagery appeared on the back cover of the July 20, 1945 issue of the armed forces’ publication *Yank*. This cartoon shows an American bomber which has just landed on a Pacific island. On the plane’s nose is a list of German cities that have been bombed, indicating that the plane has been recently transferred from Europe to the Pacific theater of the war. The bomber bears the name “Berlin Baby” and is decorated with a “nose art” painting of a voluptuous blonde nude. A thin and scruffy soldier in a jeep greets the plane. At the far left two frizzy-haired native women with droopy breasts and caricatured negroid facial features watch the proceedings. The caption records the comment of the pilot to the soldier in the jeep: “Here we are Mac! Bring on those South Sea island beauties.” A racist attitude of white superiority obtrudes in all three of these cartoons. Throughout the war there were numerous examples of American GIs holding racist views towards the people they were sent to liberate. They referred to Chinese allies as “chinks” or “slopeys.” In imitation of British parlance, they alluded to the Indians and other South Asians as “wogs.”

Nellie's World of Difference

It was in the context of the discourse of difference described above that Ensign Nellie Forbush arrived in the Pacific, fresh from Oklahoma's eastern neighbor, Arkansas. Emile de Becque is a lavish host. At his palatial estate, sitting like an Olympus overlooking the island, he entertains. He entertains other plantation owners. He entertains military officers. He entertains Nellie. As Nellie and he talk on the terrace of the lovely home, Emile asks Nellie why she had joined the Navy. She responds by telling him of her desire to go beyond her provincial horizons:

I wanted to see what the world was like--outside Little Rock, I mean. And I wanted to meet different kinds of people and find out if I like them better. And I'm finding out.⁴⁶

Our initial meeting with Nellie is in the context of her response to the island's exotic flowers and vegetation:

Nellie's Voice: What's this one?
 Emile's Voice: That is frangipani.
 Nellie's Voice: But what a color!
 Emile's Voice: You will find many more flowers out here.
 (Nellie enters, looking around her, entranced by the beauty of the scene.
 She turns upstage to gaze out over the bay. . . .)⁴⁷

Much like the American tourists who preceded her, Nellie is captivated by the region's exotic aura.

⁴⁶Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 276.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 274.

Later, after a party given by Emile to introduce her to his circle of island friends,

Nellie reiterates the sense of difference that she is experiencing on the island:

I never had such a wonderful time in my whole life. All these lovely people and that cute old man who spoke French with me and made believe he understood me. And that exciting native couple who danced for us. Oh, it's so different from *Little Rock*! (She screams that last line passionately, as if she hopes Little Rock would hear. . . .)⁴⁸

When Emile asks Nellie to marry him, she thinks aloud musically, singing:

Born on the opposite sides of the sea,
We are as different as people can be, . . .
And yet you want to marry me. . . .⁴⁹

Nellie discusses this sense of difference and its connection to her upbringing in her conversation with Lt. Cable:

Nellie: My mother's so prejudiced.
Cable: Against Frenchmen ?
Nellie: Against anyone outside Little Rock. She makes a big thing out of two people having different backgrounds.⁵⁰

Later, when Nellie sings "I'm in love with a Wonderful Guy," Hammerstein's lyrics provide a significant counterpoint to the tropical palm tree-lined beach where she sings it. The repeated references to American culture emphasize that she is presently a fish out of water:

⁴⁸Ibid., 327.

⁴⁹Ibid., 315-316.

⁵⁰Ibid., 308.

I'm as corny as Kansas in August
 I'm as normal as blueberry pie. . . .
 I'm as corny as Kansas in August
 High as a flag on the Fourth of July!⁵¹

Anthropology and the War

Perhaps, more than any other wartime location, the Pacific theater represented difference. The story of Nellie Forbush and her war experiences epitomize the interaction of white Americans with various cultures and races during World War II. In order to prepare American service personnel for such encounters, the military enlisted the services of the science of anthropology.

Some notions of the uses of anthropology during the war may be gleaned from an article entitled "Anthropology as a War Weapon" which appeared in the July 1945 issue of *American Mercury*. The article focuses on the use of the social sciences to aid Americans in the Pacific. The information provided by such specialists helped American warriors "to win friends and influence people among the natives of Oceania."⁵²

The article profiled George Murdock, a professor of anthropology at Yale University and at the time a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy. Prior to the war, Murdock had collected information on the native inhabitants of Oceania, compiling a "Cross-Cultural Survey" or "Culture Bank." The rationale behind the material that Murdock supplied to the military was that victory in the Pacific would be easier if we had

⁵¹Ibid., 317.

⁵²Charles R. Walker, "Anthropology as a War Weapon," *American Mercury* (July 1945),

a knowledge of the natives of Melanesia and Polynesia and the means to win their loyalty. Perhaps such information would counteract the preconceptions of those Americans who found themselves overseas in unfamiliar lands:

The average GI from Brooklyn or *Arkansas* [my emphasis] who lands on a coral atoll is either scared stiff or humorously unimpressed by the natives. They seem to him quite unlike Dorothy Lamour--stupid, uncouth, probably dangerous, and certainly unpredictable. Even a little anthropology will make his stay in the islands a happier one. For instance, however outlandish native behavior appears when measured by American standards, it does follow definite rules. Professor Murdock insists you will also know what to expect -- and avoid.⁵³

Government-sponsored guide books about the area and the people provided much of this information. Such publications would have been standard issue to Nellie Forbush and Joe Cable. Among these was *Native Peoples of the Pacific World* by Felix Keesing, a professor of anthropology at Stanford University and a leading authority on the Pacific. In 1941 he had published *The South Seas in the Modern World* for the Institute of Pacific Relations with the purpose of defining "comprehensively the political, strategic, economic role these Oceanic islands play in the world today, and especially the modern experience and problems of the peoples native to them."⁵⁴

⁵³Ibid., 87-88.

⁵⁴Felix M. Keesing, *The South Seas in the Modern World* (New York: John Day Co., 1942), xiii.

The material included in *Native Peoples of the Pacific World* was an outgrowth of Keesing's experience of training American naval officers for military government in the Pacific. In the book's foreword Fairfield Osborn observed that

This book should prove a major contribution to the *understanding between peoples* [my emphasis] which is the basis of our hopes for the future of civilization."⁵⁵

In publishing guides like this, the government had in mind individuals like Nellie Forbush who were being transported from their provincial origins into a new and often exotic global community.

In chapter one, "Getting Acquainted," Keesing provided his reader with a survey of the languages, government, livelihood, home conditions, social customs, and religions of the island peoples. Throughout, Keesing stressed the need for care in approaching the cultures of the Pacific:

Getting along with peoples who are very different from oneself is no easy matter. Just as their ways of living will appear strange to the visitor, so they will think he is queer in his looks and behavior. Sometimes they will be amused, though they may be too polite to show it, and at other times they will be shocked and horrified at what he does. To reach the common ground of friendship calls for plenty of imagination and sympathy, while to penetrate beneath surface appearances so as to really understand the customs, viewpoints, and feelings of such peoples demands keen sleuthing.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Felix M. Keesing, *Native Peoples of the Pacific World* (Washington, DC: The Infantry Journal, 1945), Foreword.

⁵⁶Keesing, *South Seas*, 2.

Keesing warned Americans to avoid the stereotypes perpetrated by novels and motion pictures. Such negative images of natives included the belief that either they were lazy and happy-go-lucky and should be treated like children or they were wild savages who could not be trusted. Rather, new arrivals in the islands, like Nellie, should strive for a deeper understanding of the peoples that they were now encountering, for

the more intimately one gets to know the native as a person, and wins his friendship, the more such differences fade into the background.⁵⁷

World War II became an important learning experience for those Americans who found themselves in new places such as North Africa, Burma, India, China, and the Pacific islands. Farm boys from Iowa, factory workers from New England, nurses from Arkansas, and cowboys from Oklahoma all had their horizons broadened by the experience of the war. These Americans were given the opportunity to see the new places and peoples that Nellie refers to in her conversation with Emile. This cultural contact was the subject of a July 1945 article in the *National Geographic* entitled “Yank Meets Native.” In photographs and text, the article recorded the meeting of disparate cultures. The rules for proper behavior were clearly outlined for each section of the globe visited by American service men and women. As one GI says who has recently returned from his “tour” on a remote Pacific island:

It’ll take more than bullets and battles to win this war. I figure it’ll need a lot of knowing and real understanding of

⁵⁷Ibid., 132.

the 'how come' of the customs of the people we're going to deal with.⁵⁸

The implications of American cultural imperialism involved in this contact were not forgotten in the article:

Perhaps the war would change customs all over the world. . . . All the little islands in the Pacific might be covered with jive joints and the native women might give up their grass skirts and native songs and wear trailing satin evening gowns and become female crooners.⁵⁹

Nellie's Prejudice

Nellie's desire to experience difference is severely tested at the end of Act I when she discovers that Ngana and Jerome, the two children living on Emile's plantation, are his by a Polynesian woman who is now deceased. As a southerner, Nellie is appalled by the very suggestion of miscegenation. The revelation prompts Nellie to abandon the thought of marriage with the Frenchman. Her mind echoes with memories of her conservative upbringing in Arkansas where racial segregation was an accepted fact of life. A clue to Nellie's motivation may be found in the "Our Heroine" chapter of Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* which provided the basis for the musical's primary plot and love story:

To Nellie's untutored mind any person living or dead who was not white or yellow was a nigger. And beyond that no words could go! Her entire Arkansas upbringing made it impossible for her to deny the teachings of her youth.

⁵⁸Wanda Burnett, "Yank Meets Native," *National Geographic* (July 1945): 105.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 128.

Emile de Becque had lived with the nigger. If she married him, they would be her step-[children]. . . .

Nellie was correct in assuming that no Frenchman could understand why, to an Arkansas girl, a man who had openly lived with a nigger was beyond the pale. Utterly beyond the bounds of decency!⁶⁰

Nellie's discovery of Emile's miscegenation establishes the main tension in the plot that will be resolved by the end of Act II.

The Marine and the Tonkinese

South Pacific's other example of racial conflict occurs in the love story of Marine Lt. Joe Cable and Liat, the seventeen-year old daughter of Bloody Mary, the Tonkinese peddler on the island. It is Mary who brings the couple together on the island of Bali Ha'i and sets in motion the chain of events that propel forward this updated version of the Madame Butterfly story. Cable is enchanted by the young, virginal Liat and the seductive beauty of the island of Bali Ha'i. Unlike Nellie, Cable is not bothered by the thought of miscegenation, for Mary's hut becomes his love nest with the young Tonkinese.

Convinced that she has found an ideal son-in-law, Mary tries to pressure Cable to marry her daughter Liat. She paints an idyllic picture of what life with Liat would be like:

All day long, you and Liat be together! Walk through woods, swim in sea, sing, dance, talk happy. No think more about Philadelphia. Is no good. Talk about beautiful things and make love all day long. You like? You buy?⁶¹

⁶⁰Michener, *Tales of the South Pacific*, 138-139.

⁶¹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 337.

To intensify her persuasive effort, Mary presses on with “Happy Talk” (acted out in pantomime by Liat). The song paints a picture of an eternal childlike existence in Paradise. At song’s end, Cable gives Liat a gold pocket watch that had been handed down over the years by the men of the family. Mary takes this as a sign of commitment from Cable:

Mary: When I see you firs’ time, I know you good man for Liat.
And she good girl for you. You have special good babies.⁶²

Cable, however, does not tell Mary what she wants to hear:

Cable: (Forcing the words out) Mary, I can’t . . .
marry . . . Liat.⁶³

In an emotional and anger-filled response, Mary swears at Cable, grabs the gold watch from Liat, and smashes it on the ground.

The symbolic nature of Bloody Mary’s anger is compounded by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s casting of the role. Mary was played by Juanita Hall, an African American actress who, earlier in her career, had been a cast member in Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s *Show Boat*. In *South Pacific*, she performed in what might be called “yellow face.” This term connotes a non-Asian performer playing the role of an Asian. A familiar example was the character of Charlie Chan who was played by two white actors in the 1930s and 1940s. Juanita Hall would appear again in yellow face in the 1958 production of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song*. The conflation

⁶²Ibid., 339.

⁶³Ibid.

of two races in one individual, African American and Asian, suggested the commonality of minority struggles during the decade. Mary's anger is not just that of a Tonkinese woman on one Pacific island but anger for all those who had suffered discrimination at home and abroad. Her character is a powerful presence in the tradition of Shakespeare's Caliban from *The Tempest*.

When Cable is confronted by the prospect of marriage, he realizes that he cannot bring an Asian bride back to Philadelphia. There is great symbolic irony in the situation since Philadelphia has always been known as "the city of brotherly love" and the site of the creation of America's Declaration of Independence with its core philosophy that "all men are created equal."

A better understanding of Cable's motivation can be derived from a song that was cut from the stage production but reinstated in the 1958 film version. Like Nellie, Cable is confronted by the difference of his new surroundings, and his thoughts revert to the young Bryn Mawr coed whom he had left behind in the United States: "My Girl Back Home"--

My girl back home,
I'd almost forgot.
A blue-eyed kid.
I liked her a lot.
We got engaged.
Both families were glad.
And I was told by my uncle and dad
That if I were clever and able
They'd make me part of a partnership
Of Cable, Cable, and Cable.

How far away
Philadelphia, Pa.

Princeton, NJ.
 How far are they
 From coconut palms
 And banyan trees
 And coral sands
 And Tonkinese.⁶⁴

The dilemma faced by Joe Cable was common to many of his wartime overseas comrades who met and subsequently married their Chinese, Japanese, and Polynesian girlfriends. Some even went as far as writing to their families in America, pleading for tolerance for their new war brides. In response to this situation, Congress passed the War Brides Act of 1945 which gave permission for soldiers to bring their foreign-born wives to the United States, despite quotas that had been set up particularly against Asian immigration.

"You've Got to Be Taught"

The romantic and racial dilemmas confronting Nellie and Cable come together after the Thanksgiving Day show that Nellie has organized to entertain the troops on the island. After the show, Cable discovers Nellie backstage, where she is close to tears over her breakup with Emile. She asks Cable about Liat:

Nellie: Joe! You're trying to get over to Bali Ha'i. That little girl you told me about!

Cable: Liat. I've just seen her for the last time, I guess. I love her and yet I just heard myself saying I can't marry her. What's the matter with me, Nellie? What kind of a guy am I, anyway?

Nellie's reply underlines the geographical and cultural elements of their dilemma:

⁶⁴*South Pacific*: Original Soundtrack Recording RCA 3681-2R.

Nellie: You're all right. You're just far away from home. We're both so far away from home.⁶⁵

While they are talking, Emile enters looking for Nellie, wanting to know why she has asked for a transfer to another island:

Emile: What does it mean, Nellie?

Nellie: It means that I can't marry you. Do you understand? I can't marry you.

Emile: Nellie--Because of my children?

Nellie: Not because of your children. They're sweet.

Emile: It's their Polynesian mother then--their mother and I? . . .

Nellie: Yes. I can't help it. It isn't as if I could give you a good reason. There is no reason. This is emotional. This is something that is born in me.

Emile: (Shouting the words in bitter protest) It is not. I do not believe this is born in you.

Nellie: Then why do I feel the way I do? All I know is that I can't help it. I can't help it! Explain how we feel Joe--⁶⁶

Joe does not help her, so Nellie flees the scene with another nurse. Cable and Emile are left to sort out what has happened to the two relationships.

Emile: What makes her talk like that? Why do you have this feeling, you and she? I do not believe it is born in you. I do not believe it.

Cable's response leads to the play's most powerful statement about the nature of racism, the song "You've Got to Be Taught."

Cable: It's not born in you! It happens after you're born. . . .
(Cable sings the following words, as if figuring this out for the first time).

⁶⁵Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 345.

⁶⁶Ibid., 345-346.

You've got to be taught to hate and fear.
 You've got to be taught from year to year.
 It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear--

You've got to be taught to be afraid
 Of people whose eyes are oddly made.
 And people whose skin is a different shade--
 You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before its too late.
 Before you are six or seven or eight.
 To hate all the people your relatives hate--
 You've got to be carefully taught!
 You've got to be carefully taught!⁶⁷

Central to the song and to Emile and Cable's discussion is the idea that prejudice is a learned rather than an inborn trait. This belief leads to the conclusion that with proper instruction people could learn to eliminate the evils of racism and discrimination.

Ruth Benedict and Wartime Tolerance

Such a set of beliefs was put forth during World War II by anthropologist Ruth Benedict, who became a major voice in the wartime discourse of tolerance. As a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University, Benedict had absorbed from him the importance of culture over nature (i.e., biology) in shaping people. In 1940, on the eve of World War II, she published *Race, Science and Politics*, an examination of racism and prejudice. Her goal was to answer the question of why we have race prejudice. The book was a refutation of the validity of the claims of the racists. Benedict analyzed the political component of racism and demonstrated that racial prejudice was often related to an

⁶⁷Ibid., 346-347.

ethnocentric attempt of one group to attain power at the expense of another. Ultimately, such behavior was learned rather than inborn.

Benedict's ideas received wide circulation during the war. *Race, Science, and Politics* was issued in new editions in 1943 and 1945. Benedict's ideas were also disseminated through a pamphlet, *The Races of Mankind* (1943) that she wrote with her colleague Gene Weltfish. The pamphlet was an additional attempt to confront racism at home and abroad. In 1944 Weltfish transformed the tract into a musical play about racial tolerance entitled *Meet Your Relatives*. It first appeared in *American Unity*, the monthly educational guide to the Council Against Intolerance in America. It was subsequently issued in pamphlet form and distributed to schools where it was performed during the war. The play emphasized the global context of the era and at the same time attempted to relate it to the local situation:

Who are your Neighbors? Once they were the people in the next house--Then in the next town--the next state--the next country--But now your neighborhood is THE WHOLE WORLD--because--the HORSE and BUGGY days are OVER--and in 60 hours by PLANE YOU can be FACE to FACE with your neighbor in SOUTH AFRICA--in AUSTRALIA, in the CONGO, in the SOUTH SEAS, in BURMA there were MYSTERIOUS people--that is they SEEMED mysterious to US--but--NOW THAT YOU'LL GET TO KNOW THEM BETTER--you'll find they are very much like--your SODA FOUNTAIN CLERK in the corner drug store--your GROUCHY old uncle--and Mrs. Keller--who lives on your block.⁶⁸

⁶⁸Gene Weltfish, *Meet Your Relatives* (New York: The Public Affairs Committee, 1944),

This paragraph evokes memories of *Oklahoma!* (horse and buggy days) and *South Pacific* (your neighbor in the South Seas). Nellie's comment to Emile that she "wanted to meet different kinds of people and find out if I like them better" is also brought to mind.

The play emphasizes education rather than biology as a prime factor in shaping people's attitudes:

People are VICIOUS and CRUEL because THEY ARE TAUGHT that THAT is the best way to get along--it is JUST AS NATURAL to be COOPERATIVE and GENTLE, as it is to be CRUEL and GREEDY.⁶⁹

This dialogue and a song entitled "Love Thy Neighbor" provide an interesting backdrop to Cable's rendition of "You've Got to be Taught." Five years before the creation of *South Pacific*, the basic philosophy of Hammerstein's lyrics had been laid down in Weltfish's play with its theme of "love thy neighbor." In the original version of Hammerstein's lyrics there had been a section about the power of love to overcome prejudice:

Love is quite different [from hate].
It grows by itself.
It will grow like a weed
On a mountain of stones;
You don't have to feed
Or put fat on its bones.
It can live on a smile
Or a note of a song;
It may starve for a while.
But it stumbles along.

⁶⁹Ibid., 20.

Stumbles along with its banner unfurled,
The joy and beauty, the hope of the world.⁷⁰

Although this portion of the song did not appear in the final version of the show, Nellie does overcome her prejudice and reluctance through the power of love. Emile's absence and the danger that threatens him during the reconnaissance mission to Maria Louise Island cause Nellie to review their relationship. Confronted by the possibility of his death, she realizes how much she misses him. In scene 10 of Act II, she soliloquizes:

Come back so I can tell you something. I know what counts now. All those other things--the woman you had before--her color . . . what piffle! What a pinhead I was! Come back so I can tell you . . . All that matters is you and I being together. That's all! Just together--the way we wanted it to be the first night we met! Remember?⁷¹

The love that she feels for Emile combines with Nellie's willingness and capability of learning new things far away from home. Ironically, she has to travel halfway around the world to learn the basic lessons of America's founding fathers. Nellie, in trying to find out more about Emile, ends up discovering more about herself and American values. Emile's political philosophy is right out of the Declaration of Independence:

I believe in the free life--in freedom for everyone. . . . All men are created equal.⁷²

⁷⁰Hugh Fordin, *Getting to Know Him: A Biography of Oscar Hammerstein II* (New York: Ungar Publishing Co., 1986), 270.

⁷¹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 359.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 314.

In the process of confronting difference, Nellie herself became different. A combination of education and love eventually transforms Nellie's prejudicial attitude. This process of re-education became a form of social engineering that was adopted by the federal government in the postwar decades as a means of soliciting support for its civil rights programs. *South Pacific*, enacted on Broadway and on tour and in countless school auditoriums throughout the country, also participated in that educative process.

It is significant that Nellie's and Cable's crises of racial consciousness occur immediately following the production of the Thanksgiving Follies for the troops on the island. The first Thanksgiving was an interracial feast between the English Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation and their Native American neighbors. Since the themes of tolerance and brotherhood are central to the narrative of *South Pacific*, it seems reasonable to suggest that Hammerstein specifically chose this holiday setting for the follies show. Thanksgiving is a holiday about family and, in its broadest sense, the family of man and spirit of cooperation and community that allowed the pilgrims to survive their first winter in the wilderness. During World War II Norman Rockwell (who, in the field of illustration, could be considered the equivalent of Rodgers and Hammerstein) produced his most famous series of paintings, entitled *The Four Freedoms*. Among these images which received wide dissemination in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post*, was "Freedom From Want" depicting a typical American family celebrating Thanksgiving dinner. It was a powerful symbol of Americana during the crisis of war. In *South Pacific*, Thanksgiving is placed in the global setting of the war in the Pacific.

Miscegenation

Central to the racial issues explored by *South Pacific* was that of miscegenation, which may be defined as “cohabitation, sexual relations, or marriage involving partners of different races.”⁷³ The two examples in the play are Emile’s relationship with the unnamed Polynesian woman and Cable’s love affair with the Asian Liat. This topic was not new to musical theater, for Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II had explored it in their 1927 landmark production of *Show Boat*. It became an issue of concern during and immediately after World War II when American servicemen became involved with women overseas. Many of these relationships resulted in mixed race offspring and, in a number of cases, marriage. Miscegenation was the subject of a popular postwar ballad recorded by Country and Western performer Cowboy Copas. Entitled “Filipino Baby,” the song told the story of a romance between an American sailor and a woman he meets while in the Philippines. The song documented the type of relationship illustrated by Cable and Liat in *South Pacific*:

When the warship left Manila
Sailing proudly o’er the sea,
Deep blue sea,
All the sailors’ hearts were filled with fond regret
Looking backward to this island
Where they’d spent those happy hours,
Happy hours
Makin’ love to ev’ry pretty girl they met,
When up stepped a little sailor
With his bright eyes all aglow.
Then take a look at my gal’s photograph

⁷³Miscegenation in *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), 871.

Then the sailors gathered round him
 Just to look upon her face,
 Smilin' face,
 And he said I love my dark-skinned Filipino.⁷⁴

In *South Pacific*, Cable breaks off his relationship with Liat and is ironically killed by a Japanese sniper while on the coastwatching mission with Emile. "Filipino Baby," in contrast, ends on a happy note:

Then one day he whispered darlin'
 I've come back to claim the only girl I love.
 And at night there was a wedding
 While the ship's crew gathered 'round
 All around.
 And he wed his little dark-faced Filipino.⁷⁵

This song breaks the paradigm of abandonment found in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and later in *South Pacific*. Some of this more positive resolution may be compromised by the knowledge that the original version of the song had been written during the Spanish-American War and that the "little sailor" was black. A residue of the original source is suggested by the verse that identifies the sailor as a South Carolinian.

The chorus also suggests a patriarchal and paternalistic attitude characteristic of the relationship between the United States and the colored peoples of the world:

She's my Filipino baby.
 She's my treasure and my pet,
 Lovin' pet.
 Her teeth are bright and pearly
 And her hair is black as jet.

⁷⁴Cowboy Copas, "Filipino Baby," *16 Country Hits from the 1940s*, Hollywood HCD-208.

⁷⁵Ibid.

And her heart is pure I know,
 Yes I know
 And he said I love my dark-faced Filipino.⁷⁶

This chorus bears a striking resemblance to the song “Honey Bun” that is performed by Nellie and Billis in the Thanksgiving Follies portion of *South Pacific*. Since “Filipino Baby” was a hit in the late 1940s and would have been broadcast on radio, it is possible that Oscar Hammerstein II was familiar with it. The following lyrics from “Honey Bun” should be compared with the chorus from the Cowboy Copas song quoted above:

She's my baby.
 I'm her Pap!
 Her hair is blonde and curly,
 Her lips are pips!
 I'm caught and I don't wanta run
 'Cause I'm havin so much fun with Honey-Bun.⁷⁷

The link between the song “Filipino Baby” and *South Pacific* has another interesting dimension. This parallels the link between the Western and the South Seas Idyll. This linkage will be explored in more detail in the chapter on the geopolitics of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. In the present example, however, it is of interest that a song about a love affair taking place in the Pacific was sung and popularized by a cowboy singer. Historically many of the soldiers who participated in the Spanish-American War had been cowboys in the American West. One of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders sent to the Philippines was a cowboy from Oklahoma Territory, who later returned to the

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 341-343.

Philippines as an anthropologist.⁷⁸ During World War II many of the soldiers and sailors sent to the Pacific were former cowboys who helped to spread their love of Country and Western music among their fellow servicemen and the occasional native, producing their own form of “miscegenation.”⁷⁹

The subject of miscegenation and intermarriage among the races was discussed by Carey McWilliams in *Brothers Under the Skin*, an examination of the status and conditions of America’s minority groups. He noted that this type of marriage was barred in a number of states, but that it was present where it was permitted. “The Little Brown Brothers” McWilliams chapter on Filipino Americans observed that

any number of Filipino boys have married ‘Okie’ girls. Through these strangely assorted mixed marriages a second generation is coming into existence.⁸⁰

McWilliams’ comment is ironic in that there was frequent friction between these two groups over competition for agricultural jobs in California. In the postwar years, the Okies who had settled in California would form a conservative backlash against non-white and “foreign” groups that they viewed as a threat to their livelihood and way of life.

⁷⁸Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 82.

⁷⁹Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey M. White, *Island Encounters: Black and White Memories of the Pacific War* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), especially Chapter 10.

⁸⁰Carey McWilliams, *Brothers Under the Skin* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1946), 239.

Mixed Race Children

It is significant that Ngana and Jerome, the mixed race children of *South Pacific*, are given a prominent place within the musical. The two children bracket the narrative at the very beginning and the end. They are the first characters we see on the stage as they sing their childhood refrain “Dites moi pourquoi” (tell me why).

Tell me
why
life is good
Tell me
why
Life is gay!
Tell me
Dear girl
is it
because
you love me?⁸¹

They are the chorus that tells us that this is a love story and that life is good and gay because there is love between a man and woman. For *South Pacific* is truly a story where love does conquer all, even something as nefarious as racial prejudice. These children of mixed race parentage tell us that all things are possible and they provide the essential message of the play, that understanding and acceptance come through love. They reappear at the end of the musical, this time as part of a new family with Nellie and Emile as their parents. They close the musical the same way they began it, by singing their song. This time, however, they are joined by Emile and Nellie, providing a sense of unity through musical harmony.

⁸¹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, translated by R.Bond, 273.

Bucks County Orientalism and Welcome House

The prominence given Ngana and Jerome is no accident. It can be understood in the context of Oscar Hammerstein II's friendship with two of his Bucks County, Pennsylvania neighbors: Pearl S. Buck and James Michener. These three individuals formed an informal intellectual circle in late 1940s and 1950s Pennsylvania. All three had a profound interest in the Asian Pacific region and its peoples. I would describe them as the "Bucks County Orientalists."

Pearl Buck had the longest standing interest and involvement in the area, having lived for much of her life in China, which provided the source for her best-selling novels *The Good Earth* (1931) and *Dragon Seed* (1942). During World War II, Buck was an important proponent of racial tolerance. She gave a number of speeches on the subject and published articles in mass circulation magazines and newspapers such as *The New York Times*. Her most important essays were anthologized in two wartime books: *American Unity and Asia* (1942) and *What America Means to Me* (1943). "Tinder for Tomorrow," her most important wartime essay, demonstrated how Japanese propaganda aimed at the colored people of Asia was doubly dangerous because of its element of truth. The Japanese told the story of the prejudice of the white man abroad and the discrimination against blacks in the United States.

Asian topics and the search for tolerance also played an important part in the work of James Michener and Oscar Hammerstein II. After the success of *Tales of the South Pacific*, Michener continued with *Return to Paradise* (1951), *Sayonara* (1953), *The*

Bridges of Toko-ri (1954) and the monumental *Hawaii* (1959). Hammerstein and his partner Richard Rodgers returned to Asian themes in *The King and I* (1951) and *The Flower Drum Song* (1958).

In 1949, the Bucks County Orientalists joined forces to establish Welcome House, an adoption agency for American-Asian children. Many had been fathered by American servicemen stationed in Asia and the Pacific during and after World War II. The Hammersteins' first grandchild was a Welcome House baby adopted by their daughter Alice and her husband Phil. Oscar and Phil subsequently wrote a show called *With the Happy Children* "to promote good will for and understanding about the organization among their Bucks County neighbors."⁸² The message of Welcome House for Americans was similar to that of the final scene of *South Pacific*. Americans must overcome prejudice and accept their global responsibilities. Buck later described the rationale behind her project:

This is an actual participation in the development of valuable children. I feel here in America we will never reach our full development as Americans until we realize that the great thing our democracy has to give the rest of the world is exactly the sort of thing we are trying to work out at Welcome House on a community level. It has to be done on a world level. Ours is a little pilot plan.⁸³

⁸²Fordin, *Getting to Know Him*, 285.

⁸³Rochelle Girson, "Welcome House," *Saturday Review* 135 (26 July 1952): 21.

Postwar America and the Search for Tolerance

Welcome House and *South Pacific* were part of a larger postwar discourse that attempted to confront the issues of racism and intolerance engendered by the recent war and which threatened the search for community. The year 1946 saw the publication of a new edition of *When People's Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts* (1st ed. 1942), edited by Alain Locke and incorporating essays by Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, John Collier, Robert Redfield, Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, and Carey McWilliams. The motivation behind the book sounds like a response to Lt. Cable's "You've got to be taught":

There is a growing interest and concern over the issues and problems of human relations. Tensions that arise in society over the diverse influences of racial, national, credal and cultural group loyalties seem to make imperative scholarly inquiry which will place these problems in scientific perspective. Educational authorities are becoming increasingly aware of the need for vitalizing the social studies through the incorporation of analysis and discussion of these important problems in the school curriculum. This is felt to be necessary in order that students may grapple more realistically with the critical issues of contemporary life.⁸⁴

The presidency of Harry S Truman and the years immediately after World War II provided a perfect backdrop for the ideas espoused by *South Pacific*. Succeeding Franklin Roosevelt upon the latter's death in 1945, Truman hoped to carry forward aspects of FDR's New Deal policies. Despite a Missouri background, Truman became a staunch

⁸⁴Alain L. Locke and Bernhard J. Stern, eds., *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts*, rev. ed. (New York: Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge, Inc., 1946), xi.

supporter of civil rights. He expressed his concern about this issue in a public letter of August 28, 1946:

In this country today there exists disturbing evidence of intolerance and prejudice. . . . Discrimination, like disease, must be attacked wherever it appears. This applies to the opportunity to vote, to hold and retain a job, and to secure adequate shelter and medical care no less than to gain an education compatible with the needs and ability of the individual.⁸⁵

World War II had set in motion a concern with civil rights leading to postwar racial ferment. The race riots of 1943 had resulted in the formation of hundreds of new interracial and human-relations groups. The war years had seen the migration of blacks to other parts of the nation in search of employment in the burgeoning war industries in the northern and western regions of the nation. Minorities (African American, Native American, Asian American, and Mexican American) had made a major contribution to the war effort. Now the nation owed them more than just a thank you for a job well done. The war had led to dramatic changes for the nation's minorities through involvement in new employment opportunities and military service. The African American migration had led to new voting blocks in the North. Minorities emerged from the war with a new resolve, an improved economic status and organizational skills. Racial pride was manifest in the publication of new magazines like *Ebony* which began in 1945 as a picture magazine focusing on African American beauty.

⁸⁵Ronald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Wichita, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1973), 43.

These years also witnessed the development of a civil rights coalition in pursuit of common goals. Jewish Americans and African Americans become actively involved. Having felt the sting of anti-semitism, American Jews were highly motivated in their quest for a more tolerant nation. Among those Jewish liberals who supported civil rights were Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Postwar activity in this area was also bolstered by the wartime assault on racism that appeared in the work of anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

There were a number of specific circumstances which motivated President Truman to pursue a strong civil rights program in the late 1940s. Among these were a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the continued lynching of African Americans in the South. Many minority servicemen returning home after the war were victims of white violence, including murder. The Cold War also played a role in the increased attention given to these issues. In the battle against Communist influence, Truman and his aides were afraid that the Communists would exploit the race issue in the United States and abroad. Depriving individuals of their rights could open the way for the increased influence of the Soviet Union and their global followers. Truman believed the elimination of racist Jim Crow policies existing in the United States could improve America's image in such places as Africa and Asia. To be credible abroad, Americans must be consistent in what they preached and practiced. Since the United States consisted of such a diverse population, Truman felt that the nation was vulnerable to human rights problems. In response, he launched a vigorous civil rights program between 1948 and 1949. In 1947, the federal government published *To Secure these Rights: The Report of the President's*

Committee on Civil Rights. The report was the result of an examination of the state of human rights in postwar America. Its purpose was to make “recommendations with respect to the adoption or establishment by legislation or otherwise of more adequate and effective means and procedures for the protection of the civil rights of the people of the United States.”⁸⁶

Among the report’s recommendations were:

1. the enactment by Congress of an antilynching act
2. a review of the wartime evacuation and detention experience of the Japanese Americans and a prevention in the future of the abridgement of the civil rights of any person or groups because of race or ancestry
3. the granting of suffrage by New Mexico and Arizona to their Indian citizens
4. enactment of legislation granting citizenship to the people of Guam and Samoa
5. an end to racial discrimination in all branches of the Armed services
6. the elimination of segregation based on race, color, creed, or national origin, from American life
7. enactment of a federal Fair Employment Practice Act prohibiting all forms of discrimination in private employment
8. similar legislation was recommended in the areas of education, housing, health, and public services.⁸⁷

⁸⁶Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1947), vii.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 151-173.

The basic conclusion of this postwar charter of human freedom was that “all men are created equal as well as free.”⁸⁸ Emile’s statement of his political philosophy in the 1949 musical reinforced this conclusion.

Truman responded to the report by issuing an executive order abolishing segregation in all government departments and the armed services. By 1948 there were 700 organizations involved in civil rights activity throughout the United States. In the same year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an international bill of rights.

The presidential election of 1948 was a bitter one, including dissension in the Democratic Party over the issue of civil rights. The liberal wing of the party adopted a strong civil rights plank authored by Hubert Humphrey. In response the conservative southern Democrats, led by South Carolina’s Senator Strom Thurmond, formed their own states’ rights Dixiecrat Party and condemned the liberals for their overzealous pursuit of civil rights. In the Cold War climate, Thurmond and the Dixiecrats equated racial integration with communist subversion. A *South Pacific* audience would remember this recent political battle. It was not surprising, therefore, that the road company for the musical was banned from performing in certain parts of the South.

In a time of societal stress and conflict, *South Pacific* projected a message of liberal values. At the heart of these values was the “high minded injunction to love thy

⁸⁸Quoted in McCoy and Ruetten, *Quest and Response*, 86.

neighbor, because he is really much like thee.”⁸⁹ Other works contemporary with *South Pacific* confronted these same issues head on. Between 1946 and 1949 a number of books appeared on the topic. These included Buell Gallagher’s *Color and Conscience*, Margaret Halsey’s *Color Blind*, John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom*, Gordon Allport’s *ABC’s of Scapegoating*, and Lillian Smith’s *Killers of the Dream*. Smith’s book identified the civil rights crisis as a “white problem,” a thesis supported by the thoughts and actions of Nellie Forbush and Joseph Cable in *South Pacific*.

Several other Broadway productions in the late 1940s tackled the theme of racism. These included *Finian’s Rainbow* (1947), which examined southern racism in the mythical state of Missitucky which was under the control of a Negrophobic senator named Billboard Rawkins. His character was derived from two actual southern politicians (Mississippi Senator Bilbo and Representative John Rankin) whose careers were characterized by steadfast opposition to civil rights and integration. Running concurrently on Broadway with *South Pacific* was Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson’s *Lost in the Stars*. The musical was based on Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, a novel condemning apartheid in South Africa. Dorothy Hammerstein, Oscar’s wife, had read the novel and recommended it to Weill.

Between 1947 and 1949 Hollywood also produced a series of “social problem” films which were meant to address issues brought forth by the recent war. These films included studies of anti-semitism such as *Crossfire* (1947) and *Gentleman’s Agreement*

⁸⁹Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 396-397.

(1947). Racist attitudes toward African Americans were covered in *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), and *Intruder in the Dust* (1949). *The Boy with Green Hair* (1948) looked at the problems of war orphans and difference. These films all participated in the arts' discourse about the search for tolerance in the postwar years. In discussing these films, James Nesteby has noted that in the late 1940s:

America itself was a microcosm of a world quickly dividing into the first world of America and its allies, the second world of Russia and its allies, and the third world made up of the remaining unaligned countries, many of them newly created on the continents of Africa and Asia.⁹⁰

The Search for Community

Oklahoma! and *South Pacific* although separated by six years in terms of production, by 43 years historically, and by an ocean in setting are linked in their search for a good society based upon the idea of tolerance of difference. Both musicals are concerned with a search for community and cooperation. This concern was characteristic of a decade in which the nation and the world were turned upside down. Americans were exposed to new places, people, and cultures to a larger degree than ever before. All of this "shoulder rubbing" led to both new tensions and, in many cases, new understanding of the complexity of the world. The 1940s was therefore characterized by a quest for unity among diversity. In mid-decade two surveys appeared documenting that quest: *One America: The History, Contributions, and Present Problems of Our Racial and National*

⁹⁰James R. Nesteby, *Black Images in American Films, 1896-1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 245.

Minorities (1945, 1st ed. 1937) and Wallace Stegner's *One Nation* (1945). *One America*'s anthology of writings included a section on race and education relevant to the "You've got to be carefully taught" philosophy central to the message of *South Pacific*. Joseph Roucek's "Future Steps Toward Cultural Democracy" is pertinent in this regard:

Only by *careful* thought and the earnest effort of every agency of *education* to direct the *attitudes* of all can the present lead toward the goal of replacing conflict by earnest and sincere cooperation. Only thus can we achieve an unprecedented sense and fact of *national unity*, through the pluralism of culture. Only so can America truly become a cultural democracy--One America!⁹¹ [my emphases]

Harold Wilson's "Intercultural Education and International Relations" could be seen as a manifesto for America's Nellie Forbushs preparing for the realities of the postwar world:

The world-wide ramifications of intergroup relations within the United States are of consequence to education--both to education for constructive international relations and to education for intergroup cooperation within our borders. If pupils acquire through the pages of their history books a Kiplingesque condescension toward China--as apparently, they often do--an adequate understanding and friendly attitude toward Chinese Americans is thereby made harder to acquire. A good neighbor policy toward the Indian republics in northern South America cannot thrive on an educational program which assumes the *frontier ideology* [my emphasis] that the 'only good Indian is a dead one.'

Democratic realization and acceptance of the inherent worth and dignity of dark-skinned individuals in Haiti or the Philippines or India is not easily built into young

⁹¹Francis James Brown and Joseph Slabey Roucek, eds., *One America: The History, Contributions, and Present Problems of Our Racial and National Minorities* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945), 629.

citizens for whom a dark skin in the United States is evidence of innate inferiority. There is a sense in which prejudice is all of one piece; the struggle for friendly relations among varying social groups--a long and hard struggle--is fought on an infinite number of fronts.⁹²

The editors of *Look* magazine teamed up with novelist Wallace Stegner to create a pictorial look at America's minorities. The need for the book was described by Harlan Logan, the magazine's editor:

Some eighteen months ago, along with many others charged with the responsibility of studying and presenting to the public significant facts concerning America, the Editors of LOOK became increasingly aware of what seemed a growing wave of intolerance and prejudice. Discrimination is always prevalent under wartime conditions. Consequently, we decided to make a survey of racial and religious stresses in wartime America. . . . Our purpose is to focus attention upon one of the gravest social problems facing our country in this critical time: to present the objective treatment of individual minorities in picture-text which may be communicable to those of our fellow citizens who stand to profit most from its revelations . . . Its sane and defensible stand is that suggested by the Declaration of Independence which guarantees all Americans something like equal opportunities regardless of race, creed, or color. . . . May this book serve to bring again to the attention of all farsighted Americans the sacred dignity of the human being regardless of class or race or birth.⁹³

Stegner's prescription for Americans is a philosophy of "unity in diversity." In this important task America must serve as a model for the rest of the world:

⁹²Ibid., 578-579.

⁹³Wallace E. Stegner and the Editors of *Look*, *One Nation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), v.

The problem of the American Negro is one with the problem of India; the Chinese in Chinatown have counterparts in China; the mistreatment of Mexicans in the fields of the Southwest has international implications that involve all of Latin America. And the world that we hope for, where peace and international accord are possible through cooperation and arbitration, seems like a yeasty dream indeed even if within the United States, 'conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal', we cannot achieve a harmony of our races and creeds into a single nation.⁹⁴

The strong pictorial element of *One Nation*, with its numerous black and white photographs of minority peoples, placed it in the tradition of Depression era documentaries. In fact, some of the photographs were derived from the collections of the Farm Security Administration. Compiled by the editors of *Look*, these images were organized in the manner of photo-essays found in that magazine and *Life*, the major mass-circulation periodical of the era. This was photography as a tool of social persuasion within an environment of mass circulation--"You've got to be carefully taught."

As we move from *Oklahoma!* to *South Pacific*, we move from a search for national unity to one of global unity. As shown by many of our witnesses to the decade, these were linked phenomena in the minds of many Americans. Technological advances played an important role in this type of thinking. Wartime advances in communications and transportation had helped shrink the globe to "neighborhood" size. The dark side of technology which led to the industrialized slaughter of the Jews in the Holocaust and the

⁹⁴Ibid., 336.

leveling of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atomic bomb motivated many to seek a more unified world.

The Family of Man

Both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* ended in the marriage of each play's romantic couple and the establishment of the beginnings of a new family and community. In *Oklahoma!* the alliance between the farmer and the cowman and the anticipation of statehood for the Territory suggest the formation of a national community. In *South Pacific* the union of a French plantation owner, an Arkansas nurse, and two mixed race children (Polynesian and French) signify the building of an international community. In the play's final scene, Emile, Nellie, Ngana, and Jerome are seated around the dinner table in the imagery of the nuclear family that would typify American popular discourse in the postwar years from Norman Rockwell to *Father Knows Best*.

The global family that is integral to the resolution of *South Pacific* appeared in other sources during the period. Between 1948 and 1949 *Ladies Home Journal* published a series of photo essays entitled "People are People the World Over." The series consisted of 12 sets of photographs of families representing twelve nations engaged in similar family activities such as eating, shopping, or traveling. The articles helped link America to the emerging global culture. By picturing the world as a community of humanity, the series provided ideological support for the goals of organizations like the United Nations, whose headquarters' cornerstone was laid in New York City in October, 1949. In the same year, mythologist Joseph Campbell published his now classic *Hero With A*

Thousand Faces, an examination of the relationships among the myths of the world. For Campbell, the purpose of the book was to promote the “cause of those forces that are working in the present world for unification, not in the name of some ecclesiastical or political empire, but in the sense of human mutual understanding.”⁹⁵

The message of internationalism and the brotherhood of man represented in *South Pacific* is further development of the globalist philosophy espoused by Wendell Willkie's *One World*. The book, which was published in 1943, the same year that *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway, held out hope for a postwar world community and a plea for tolerance and cooperation among different peoples. Willkie also linked colonialism, racism, and the issue of civil rights as significant considerations for the postwar world. *One World*, like *Oklahoma!*, was immensely popular with the American public and became a bestseller, selling over three million copies.

Some of the idealism and optimism in Willkie's book carried over into the second half of the decade through the organization known as the United World Federalists, founded by Cord Meyer. By 1949, it numbered 45,000 members and had over 700 local chapters.⁹⁶ Prominent among the members of this group was Oscar Hammerstein II, who became a spokesman for the movement that advocated world peace through world law. At the invitation of Norman Cousins (also a member), Hammerstein contributed articles

⁹⁵William S. Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 74.

⁹⁶J.A. Yoder, “The United World Federalists” in *Peace Movements in America*, ed. Charles Chatfield (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 100.

to the *Saturday Review*.⁹⁷ In 1949 Hammerstein produced and directed a stage production for the Writers Board for World Government entitled *The Myth That Threatens the World*. Originally intended for a solo performance in New York City, the production traveled to Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, San Francisco, and other cities for the purpose of raising funds and winning public support for the idea of a world government. Cast members included Henry Fonda and African American soprano Marian Anderson. Significantly, the supporting cast consisted of members of the New York company of the concurrently running *South Pacific*.

In the 1940s, the concept of viewing the future in global terms became a dominant public discourse from the Broadway stage to the geopolitical stage. The element common to all these examples was the belief that national and world peace must be a function of tolerance for others.

All of these strands would come together in 1955 in the exhibition, *The Family of Man*, organized by photographer Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art. Available both as a book of photographs as well as an exhibition, *The Family of Man* allowed readers or museum visitors to traverse the globe and absorb the liberal sentiment that mankind is one. Individuals were made to feel part of an extended family. The pictures of humanity gathered from all over the world stressed the unity of mankind and the need for tolerance in a potentially dangerous Cold War world. In 1955 *Oklahoma!* was released as a major motion picture. *South Pacific* followed in 1958, coinciding with

⁹⁷Oscar Hammerstein II, "Getting Off the Pyramid," *The Saturday Review of Literature* (23 December 1950): 22-23.

the publication of William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick's *The Ugly American*, which criticized American diplomatic behavior in Asia. The issues prevalent in the two Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals were apparently still part of an active American discourse.

CHAPTER 5

AN OPTIMISTIC PARADISE: “BEAUTIFUL MORNIN’S” AND “ENCHANTED EVENINGS”

Introduction

A philosophy of optimism characterizes *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* as it does the other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals. Richard Kislán has suggested that this optimism is characteristic of the traditional musical theater:

The sublime message of any musical must ultimately be: life is worth it. Even when things do not turn out all right in the end, the very existence of the artifact which is the show inspires hope, promotes growth, and reaffirms life. The cynicism and despair that inhibit human and artistic development are anathema to musical theater.¹

According to Kislán, the optimistic core of the musical is based upon its foundation in the theater of romance, where mankind’s aspirations are supported by a “romantic love [that] radiates from the center of all things.”² In both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, romantic love is at the heart of the resolution of the narratives. Curly McLain and Laurey Williams’ marriage symbolizes the new cooperation between the farmers and the cowmen. Through romantic love Nellie Forbush overcomes her prejudice and joins Emile’s multicultural family. In both examples, the old adage that “love conquers all” rings true and demonstrates the

¹Richard Kislán, *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater*, rev., expanded ed. (New York: Applause Books, 1995), 5.

²*Ibid.*, 2.

power of this ideal to inspire man to reach out beyond realistic limitation, because the romantic vision celebrates forever the wonder of living.³

To more fully understand the role of optimism in *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, it will be necessary to examine specific examples from the musicals. In each case, the main character served as the focus of this optimistic philosophy: Curly in *Oklahoma!* and Nellie in *South Pacific*.

"Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'!": Optimism in Oklahoma!

In April 1943, war was raging in Europe and the Pacific and American men and women were participating in an important moment in the nation's history. A world away, another kind of history was being made on the New York stage. At the St. James Theater on Broadway, *Oklahoma!* opened to critical acclaim. Upon the final note of a stirring overture, the curtain rose on a turn-of-the-century Oklahoma farmhouse. A woman was churning butter in the front yard. A cowboy was singing in the distance.

There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow.
There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow.
The corn is as high as a elephant's eye,
An' it looks like it's climbin' clear up to the sky.

Oh, what a beautiful mornin'!
Oh, what a beautiful day!
Ev'rythin's goin' my way, etc.⁴

³Ibid., 3.

⁴Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 7.

What an upbeat, auspicious beginning for a wartime musical! At that very moment Americans needed reassurance and a sense of direction and *Oklahoma!* responded. The musical ran for 2,248 performances and was still playing to packed houses when the war ended in 1945.

Opening the show with this song established the mood for the message of love and optimism on the American frontier. To achieve this mood, Hammerstein had converted Lynn Riggs' introduction to *Green Grow the Lilacs* into "Oh, what a beautiful mornin'!"'s sanguine lyrics:

It is a radiant summer morning several years ago, the kind of morning which, enveloping the shapes of earth--men, cattle in the meadow, blades of young corn, streams--makes them seem to exist now for the first time, their images giving off a visible golden emanation that is partly true and partly a trick of imagination, focusing to keep alive a loveliness that may pass away.⁵

Hammerstein's goal was to get the audience to slip quickly into the spirit of the story:

"Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'!" opens the play and creates an atmosphere of relaxation and peace and tenderness. It introduces the light-hearted young man who is the center of the story.⁶

The choice of this opening song was of major importance not only in setting the predominantly optimistic tone of the musical but also in overcoming the memories of the previous decade when Oklahoma had become a predominant symbol of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression.

⁵Hammerstein, *Lyrics*, 9.

⁶Ibid., 9-10.

For many Americans, the Dust Bowl was the central event in the history of Oklahoma. By 1943 a collection of myths and stereotypes about the state and the people had been ingrained in the nation's consciousness. At the center of that image was the indigent "Okie," whose type had been reinforced in 1939 by the appearance of John Steinbeck's best-selling novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 1940, the impact of the plight of the Okies intensified through John Ford's Academy Award-winning film of the Steinbeck book.

In preparation for the film, Ford had utilized the collection of photographs taken by Farm Security Administration photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein depicting the plight of the land and its people. Lange is best remembered for her photograph of the *Migrant Mother* (1936) depicting an Okie woman surrounded by her daughters in a tent-like shelter in the "promised land" of California. During the same year, Rothstein completed a series of photographs in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, depicting the results of a recent dust storm. *A Father and Sons Fleeing a Dust Storm* was the most famous of the series. In Steinbeck's novel, Ford's film, and the photographs of Lange and Rothstein, the mornings were anything but beautiful and what corn there had been was now buried under layers of dust. The news media picked up on these images and helped to create the contemporary view of Oklahoma:

The Dust Bowl became synonymous with drought. The term Okie, spat out like brackish water, connoted society's riffraff in search of relief checks in the golden state of California . . . the pictorial chronicle [of photographers like

Lange] created the impression that all of the depression's misery centered on the Sooner state.⁷

With such a vision of Oklahoma and Oklahomans in mind, Rodgers and Hammerstein set out to overcome the negative stereotypes. In adapting *Green Grow the Lilacs*, they struggled to come up with a suitable name for their production. *Oklahoma* was at first rejected because of its association with the Okies and the Dust Bowl. During tryouts prior to the New York opening, it was called *Away We Go* from the Western square dance call "do se do and away we go." By the time the musical had reached New York, however, the title *Oklahoma!* had been restored, this time with the addition of an exclamation point at the end of the word to add a positive, upbeat quality to the name.

The image of Oklahoma and the Dust Bowl that the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical had to overcome was also appearing in the folk music being performed and recorded in New York City in the early 1940s. Most of this centered around the songs of Oklahoman Woody Guthrie who had come to New York in late 1939. After seeing John Ford's film of *The Grapes of Wrath* which opened at the Rivoli Theater in January 1940, Guthrie wrote the song "Tom Joad" as a musical version of the Steinbeck narrative. In April of that year, Guthrie recorded this song plus 12 others for RCA Victor. These were issued as a set of 78 rpm recordings known as the *Dust Bowl Ballads*. In addition to performing in concerts (including a 1940 tribute to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*) Guthrie brought his songs to public attention over Alan Lomax's CBS radio program "Folk

⁷H. Wayne Morgan, *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), 164.

School of the Air.” His performances in New York City were popular with intellectuals and the followers of Leftist political organizations. Guthrie, along with Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, became the key player in the 1940s folk revival and literally defined the Okie protest ballad.

To better understand the significance of “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” in overturning the negative aura associated with Oklahoma and Oklahomans, it will be useful to compare one of the contemporary Guthrie songs: “Dust Bowl Blues”:

I just blowed in, I got them dust
bowl blues,
I just blowed in, I got them dust
bowl blues,
I just blowed in . . . I’ll soon blow out
again.

I guess you’ve heard about every
kind of blues,
I guess you’ve heard about every
kind of blues,
But you can’t sing pretty when the
dust gets in your flues.

I seen the dust so black that I
couldn’t see a thing,
I seen the dust so black that I
couldn’t see a thing,
And the wind so cold it nearly shut
your water off.

I seen the wind so high it blowed my
fences down,
I seen the wind so high it blowed my
fences down,
It buried my tractor six feet under
ground.

Well, it turned my farm into a pile
 of sand,
 It turned my farm into a pile of
 sand,
 I had to hit the road with a bundle
 in my hand.⁸

Guthrie's lyrics were the musical equivalent of Rothstein's Cimarron photographs. They represent the mirror opposite of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Beautiful Mornin'!" where "the corn is as high as a elephant's eye." Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Blues," in contrast, is replete with images of decay and dying, while "Beautiful Mornin'" is a paean to fecundity where

All the sounds of the earth are like music---

An important part of the Okie image was their migrant refugee status. Scenes of trucks and cars overloaded with families and all their earthly possessions were common in the media. Guthrie composed a song describing this phenomenon, "Blowin Down This Road":

I'm a blowin' down this old dusty
 road,
 I'm a blowin' down this old dusty
 road,
 I'm a blowin' down this old dusty
 road, Lord, Lord,
 And I ain't gonna be treated this
 a way.
 Lost my farm down in old Oklahoma
 Lost my farm down in old Oklahoma
 Lost my farm down in old Oklahoma,
 Lord, Lord,

⁸Alan Lomax, *Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), 222.

And I ain't gonna be treated this
a way.⁹

Oklahoma!'s "The Surrey with the Fringe on the Top," where the passengers ride behind "a team of snow-white horses / In the slickest gig you ever see!", provides a comparison to Guthrie's vision of down-trodden migrants. Instead of the flotsam and jetsam of displaced lives, there are yellow wheels, brown leather upholstery, and isinglass curtains as protection against the weather. In contrast to the weather-beaten Okies, these Oklahomans ride down the road with an air of joy and hubris:

All the world'll fly in a flurry
When I take you out in a surrey,
When I take you out in the surrey with the fringe on the
top!
When we hit that road, hell fer leather,
Cats and dogs'll dance in the heather,
Birds and frogs'll sing all together and the toads will hop!¹⁰

The finale of the musical, in which the entire ensemble sings the title song, leaves no doubt in the minds of its audience that we have left the world of the Dust Bowl for an agrarian paradise where "the wavin' wheat/ Can sure smell sweet/When the wind comes right behind the rain." Here there are no dust storms or drought for "the land we belong to is grand." As if to emphasize this optimistic point to the audience, the last lines read:

You're doin' fine, Oklahoma!
Oklahoma, O. K.!¹¹

⁹Ibid., 216.

¹⁰Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 11.

¹¹Ibid., 76.

The two divergent paths to telling the story of Oklahoma are further distinguished if this song is compared with Woody Guthrie's "The Great Dust Storm":

On the fourteenth day of April in
 nineteen thirty five,
 There struck the worst of dust
 storms that ever filled the sky;
 You could see that dust storm
 coming, it looked so awful black,
 And through our little city, it left a
 dreadful track.

From Oklahoma City to the Arizona
 line,
 Dakota and Nebraska to the lazy Rio
 Grande,
 It fell across our city like a curtain
 of black rolled down.
 We thought it was our judgement, we
 thought it was our doom.

...

This storm took place at sundown
 and lasted through the night,
 When we looked out next morning
 we saw a terrible sight:
 We saw outside our windows where
 wheat fields once had grown
 Was now a rippling ocean of dust
 the wind had blown.

It covered up our fences, it
 covered up our barns,
 It covered up our tractors in this
 wild and windy storm.
 We loaded our jalopies and piled
 our families in,
 We rattled down the highway to
 never come back again.¹²

¹²Lomax, *Hard-Hitting Songs*, 218-219.

In the hands of Rodgers and Hammerstein, such Dust Bowl imagery of the tragic 1930s was converted into an agrarian paradise waiting for development and eventual statehood.

Lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II carefully selected words for “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’” and “Oklahoma!” They demonstrate an awareness of the importance of nature and environment in the American Southwest. Weather has always been a significant factor in the history of Oklahoma. Tornadoes, electrical storms, and drought are a way of life there. Oklahomans quickly learned the importance of reading the wind and the sky. A beautiful morning could become a raging twister in the late afternoon. Hammerstein’s lyrics, however, emphasize the optimistic side of these weather patterns. For example, after a beneficial rain, “the wind comes sweepin’ down the plain.” Each of Hammerstein’s lyrics appear to answer those in Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads*.

Mnemonic Cleansing in Oklahoma!

To overcome past history, Rodgers and Hammerstein employed the technique of “mnemonic cleansing.” “Mnemonic cleansing” is a method of clearing away recent memories by substituting more positive aspects of their subject’s history. In essence it is akin to the philosophy advocated by composer Johnny Mercer in his 1945 hit “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive.” Mercer’s song told Americans to bring out the positive in their lives by eliminating the negative. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s outlook meshes with this wartime philosophy. Although they did not entirely eliminate the negative from their musicals (e.g., Jud Fry, racial prejudice), the emphasis focused upon the positive aspects of life.

Besides lyrics, there were other ways in which *Oklahoma!* projected a positive image. One was through art. For example, Lemuel Ayers' set designs for the musical were inspired by examples of the painting style known as Regionalism. Contemporary critics noted the similarity of *Oklahoma!*'s sets to the paintings of Grant Wood's bright and cheerful Iowa farm scenes familiar to the American public through articles and reproductions in *Life* magazine. Wood's optimistic regionalism stands in sharp contrast to that of another regional artist. Jerry Bywaters was one of the so-called "Lonestar Regionalists" from Texas. In 1937 he painted *Sharecropper*, depicting a forlorn Dust Bowl farmer standing next to a withered stalk of corn under attack by locusts. Bywater's painting style is severe and devoid of prettiness and sentimentality, making it akin to Woody Guthrie's ballads.

The murals of Missouri Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton also parallel some of *Oklahoma!*'s positive views of the future. In 1931 Benton had completed a set of murals entitled *America Today* depicting the character and contributions of the four regions of the United States. The "West Today" portrayed a land not only of cowboys and cattle but also of aviation, oil wells and a developing industrial power. Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Kansas City" presented a similar progressive attitude. Both Benton and *Oklahoma!* looked to the future of the American West as a locus of progress and development. Here there was no dust bowl wasteland.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's historic and retrospective approach to Oklahoma appears in the work of another key figure of the Regionalist art movement: John Steuart Curry. In 1938 Curry worked on a mural for the Department of Interior building in

Washington, D. C. entitled *The Oklahoma Land Rush*. Curry, like Rodgers and Hammerstein, returned to the promising decades of the early history of the state. The emphasis in the mural, as it would be in the musical, was upon the dynamic pioneering spirit of the region and the potential for beginning anew.

Another source of optimism utilized by Rodgers and Hammerstein was the contemporary popularity of the musical B Western and its singing cowboy heroes, such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. This type of film offered Depression era and wartime Americans upbeat and escapist fare. Such Gene Autry songs as “Back in the Saddle Again” and “You are my Sunshine,” along with the cool harmonies of Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers, left Americans feeling good about themselves, hoping that evil could be overcome and harmony restored to the community. Curly McLain played this type of role in *Oklahoma!*.

Photographs taken for the Farm Securities Administration between the late 1930s and the early years of World War II depicted a strong sense of optimism. Roy Stryker, the head of the agency’s photography unit, issued memos to his photographers encouraging them to seek out images of a positive and hopeful nature around the nation to use in the propaganda war against American enemies abroad. The photographers were to seek out American heroes and icons. Arthur Rothstein, who had earlier provided the image of a devastated and barren Dust Bowl Oklahoma, in 1939 produced a very different view of the American West. He portrayed heroic pre-“Marlboro Man” cowboys and ranchers hard at work in Montana and Colorado. Between 1939 and 1940 Oklahoma’s image changed when Russell Lee went there to photograph corn and wheat near Muskogee. The

resulting color photographs with their emphasis upon an agricultural plenitude parallel the representation of nature as bountiful as seen in *Oklahoma!*. They, too, were meant to overturn the earlier view of the region.

The optimistic message of *Oklahoma!* is part of a larger discourse of optimism linked to the American Dream of new beginnings in a New Eden. If the Dust Bowl represented the expulsion from the Garden, then *Oklahoma!* symbolized a return to an Edenic paradise. In the early years of the state's history, settlers noted this edenic quality conveying an almost pastoral innocence. Rich, verdant grasslands of Northern and Central Oklahoma gave the region an arcadian quality. "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" revived that point of view. Yancy Cravat, the main character in Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* (1930), summed it up best when he suggested that "Here everything is fresh."¹³

Rodgers and Hammerstein's mnemonic cleansing succeeded in washing away the negative elements of the state's past history. Contemporary reviews of the musical stressed its optimism. Stark Young, in his review in the *New Republic* of April 19, 1943, commented that both "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" and "People Will Say We're in Love" were "songs full of well-being and happy health and a whistling swinging step, with an air springing out of the sheer impulse to sing and so I sing."¹⁴ In an article in *Life*,

¹³Edna Ferber, *Cimarron* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1930), 116.

¹⁴Stark Young, "Oklahoma with Details," *New Republic* (19 April 1943), 508-509.

which usually mirrored the views of the nation, the musical was praised for its “sunny warmth and good spirits.”¹⁵

Central to the optimistic message of *Oklahoma!* is the sense of renewal and rebirth. By returning to the state’s earlier history, the musical tapped into the region’s symbolic connotation of new beginnings and the chance to start again. This last American frontier carried with it an orientation toward the nation’s future. By going backwards in time, Rodgers and Hammerstein were participating in a longstanding discourse in American culture. The tendency to slough off the old and be reborn formed the central thesis of D. H. Lawrence’s analysis of America in his *Classic American Literature*. Lawrence suggested that this process of rebirth is the central myth of America. As a primary example of this tendency, he cited James Fenimore Cooper’s novels about Natty Bumppo:

The Leatherstocking novels . . . go backwards from old age to golden youth. That is the true myth of America. She starts old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin, towards a new youth. It is the myth of America.¹⁶

Attending performances of *Oklahoma!* in the 1940s and later enabled the audience to participate in that sense of rebirth and a “sloughing off” of the old. This experience was especially true of veterans coming home after the war. Upon returning to New York City in 1945, one who had served with the 8th Air Force in Europe vividly remembers

¹⁵“Doris Lee: Oklahoma, Musical Show; Paintings,” *Life*, 6 March 1944, 82-84.

¹⁶D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking Press, 1923, 1964), 54.

attending a performance of *Oklahoma!* with his wife. For him it was like a cleansing, a removal of the memories of war. The sense of a new start, as symbolized by the marriage of Curly and Laurey, buoyed this couple's spirits.¹⁷ This was the attitude with which many postwar couples commenced the future. A similar message enhanced the popularity of postwar songs like Ernest Tubb's "Rainbow at Midnight":

After the war was over
I was comin' home to you.
I saw a rainbow at midnight
Out on the ocean blue.

The stars in heaven were shinin'.
The moon gave its light from above.
I saw your face in this mirror.
It made me think of our love.

We'll build a home in the country
And make all our dreams come true.
There we will make a heaven
Sweetheart, just for we two.

Here we will be so happy
And have a baby or two.
We'll name them after the rainbow
Because it reminds me of you.

After this life is over
And our journey here is through,
We'll move to the land of the rainbow
And live in the starry blue.¹⁸

¹⁷I wish to thank Professor Abraham Veinus of Syracuse University for sharing his recollections of attending a performance of *Oklahoma!* in New York City with his wife at the end of World War II. During the War, Professor Veinus was stationed in Europe as a member of the U.S. Army Eighth Air Force.

¹⁸Ernest Tubb, *Rainbow at Midnight*, *Ernest Tubb Retrospective*, Vol.1, MCA MCAD-20505, compact disc.

Richard Rodgers, in his autobiography *Musical Stages* (1975), summed up these audience feelings:

People would come to see *Oklahoma!* and desire not pleasure but a measure of optimism. It dealt with pioneers in the Southwest, it showed their spirit and the kinds of problems they had to overcome in carving out a new state; and it gave citizens an appreciation of the hardy stock from which they'd sprung. People said to themselves, in effect, 'If this is what our country looked and sounded like at the turn of the century, perhaps once this was over we can once again return to this kind of buoyant, optimistic life.'¹⁹

This optimistic view of life has been at the heart of *Oklahoma!*'s success and popularity over the decades. If Americans have always been searching for Paradise, then Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical helped reinforce the idea that it was possible to destroy history and restore the Garden. We must now turn to the global implications of that philosophy as demonstrated in *South Pacific*.

South Pacific: Cockeyed Optimists and the Children of Light

When *South Pacific* opened on Broadway in 1949, optimism had become an increasingly precious value in American culture. Tom Engelhardt termed the immediate postwar years "Victory Culture."²⁰ The term evokes an impression of American omnipotence, of abundance after the defeat of Germany and Japan. This euphoria was

¹⁹Quoted in Max Wilk, *OK!: The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 238.

²⁰Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

temporary, however, for the horrors of the recent war were now apparent. The Holocaust had exterminated five and one-half million Jews. The atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese had ushered in an era of frightening new possibilities for mass destruction.

“The Age of Anxiety,” “The Age of Doubt,” and “The Dark Ages” were startling epithets for this alarming disappearance of optimism. “The Age of Anxiety,” the title chosen by Leonard Bernstein for his *Symphony No. 2*, was based on the poem by W. H. Auden. The symphony’s first performance was in Boston on April 8, 1949, just one day after *South Pacific* opened on Broadway. Bernstein described his composition as “theater music” which attempted to record “our difficult and problematical search for faith.”²¹

The more pessimistic mood of America in the late 1940s also resulted from a series of historic events that occurred during these years. By 1950, the United States felt less secure in its new global role which was being challenged by the forces of world Communism. On March 5, 1946 Winston Churchill delivered his warning about the spread of Soviet influence:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an Iron Curtain has descended across the continent of Europe. The Dark Ages may return, the Stone Age.²²

A year later, on March 7, President Truman announced the global containment policy known as the Truman Doctrine, establishing the United States as a world

²¹Leonard Bernstein and Jack Gottlieb, *Album Notes to Leonard Bernstein Symphony No. 2, The Age of Anxiety*, Deutsche Grammaphon 2530 969.

²²Quoted in Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Boston: SouthEnd Press, 1982), 41.

policeman. The immediate impetus behind it was an effort to help the British defeat left wing and Communist forces in Greece. Its goal was “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities around the world.”²³ The Truman Doctrine was characterized by its anti-Communist rhetoric. This was in keeping with the times since 1947 also witnessed the beginnings of the investigations of the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC). These would be broadened in the 1950s by the activities of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy whose investigations would evolve into “witch hunts,” creating a national paranoia. In 1949, the year that *South Pacific* opened on Broadway, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, shattering American confidence that it was the only global power. More importantly, American attention and fear also turned to Asia in this year when a Communist government took over in China and entered into an alliance with the Soviet Union.

It was against such a backdrop that Americans attended performances of *South Pacific* on Broadway for the next five years. Here was a musical that looked at America in war against the Japanese in the Pacific but contrived to turn the horrors of that war into an optimistic musical drama. In the context of the times, the portrayal of the main character, Nellie Forbush, as a self-described “cockeyed optimist” is significant.

Again, as in *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers and Hammerstein would utilize mnemonic cleansing. In *Oklahoma!*, they had reversed Dust Bowl memories by traveling back in time to portray a state in ascendancy. By 1949 the economic and political turmoil in Asia

²³Ibid., 43.

and the South Pacific heightened a culture of fear. At the end of this uncertain and stressful decade, *South Pacific* quickened a feeling of Victory Culture. Here, in the very part of the world where the country focused on new threats to its hegemony, Americans could witness a time when they were in control. Once again Rodgers and Hammerstein returned to the past to manage the present.

The central appeal of *South Pacific* to postwar audiences was its buoyant optimism. Converting World War II in the Pacific into a musical was no easy accomplishment. For memories of this “war without mercy” were still vivid.²⁴ Philip Beidler suggested that Rodgers and Hammerstein succeeded by tapping into a firmly implanted mythic geography. According to Beidler, they accomplished the objective by presenting the war as a romantic adventure. Hence, *South Pacific* resembles a South Seas travel book or adventure movie. This genre was well known to Americans brought up on the South Seas stories of Somerset Maugham and the novels of Charles Nordhoff and James Hall and exotic films such as *South of Pago Pago*, *Tabu*, and *Jungle Princess*. Beidler describes this process as “American Remembering” in which history is converted into a more palatable form for a mass audience.²⁵

Added to the romantic setting of *South Pacific* and all of its mythical trappings is the overriding optimism of Ensign Nellie Forbush. Her philosophy of life is introduced at

²⁴John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

²⁵Philip Beidler, “*South Pacific* and American Remembering; or ‘Josh, We’re Going to Buy This Son of a Bitch!’” in *Journal of American Studies* 27 (1993).

the very beginning of the musical in the character-defining song “A Cockeyed Optimist.”

The audience sees Nellie and Emile talking on the terrace of his island home. She says:

Gosh, its beautiful here. Just look at that yellow sun! You know, I don't think it's the end of the world like everyone else thinks. I can't work myself up to getting that low. (He smiles) Do you think I'm crazy too? They all do over at the fleet hospital. You know what they call me? Knucklehead Nellie. I suppose I am, but I can't help it.

Nellie then sings “A Cockeyed Optimist”:

When the sky is a bright canary yellow
I forget every cloud I've ever seen--
So they call me a cockeyed optimist,
Immature and incurably green!

I have heard people rant and rave and bellow
That we're done and we might as well be dead--
But I'm only a cockeyed optimist
And I can't get it into my head.

I hear the human race
Is falling on its face
and hasn't very far to go,
But every whippoorwill
Is selling me a bill
And telling me it just ain't so!

I could say life is just a bowl of jello
And appear intelligent and smart
But I'm stuck
(Like a dope!)
With a thing called hope,
And I can't get it out of my heart . . . Not this heart!²⁶

The song serves a function similar to that of “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'” in

Oklahoma! It sets the mood for what is to follow and tells us that whatever may happen,

²⁶Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 276.

everything is going to be all right despite a world of war and conflict. Hammerstein's optimistic lyrics are backed by a cheery and hopeful melody. Nellie's emphasis on her heart at the end of the song suggests that once again, as in *Oklahoma!*, love will play an important role in resolving the tensions of the story.

Niebuhr and Pessimism

Nellie's philosophy continues the politics of optimism already displayed in *Oklahoma!*. By the postwar period, however, this philosophy had come under attack. The basis for this attack may be found in the writings of Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1944, the year between the opening of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, Niebuhr published *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy And A Critique of Its Traditional Defence*. His goal was to break apart the liberal progressive connection between democracy and innocence. The title of his book was taken from the *Bible*:

The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the Children of Light.²⁷

The audience Niebuhr addressed were liberal idealists, the Children of Light. Although individuals were well-intentioned, he regarded them as excessively optimistic about human nature and human history. The contemporary experience of World War II, he contended, refuted their optimism. Niebuhr criticized the Children of Light for their foolishness and reliance on sentimentality:

²⁷*Luke 16:8*, KJV (King James Version).

Modern democratic civilization is, in short, sentimental rather than cynical. It has an easy solution for the problem of anarchy and chaos on both the national and international level of community, because of its fatuous and superficial view of man. It does not know that the same man who is ostensibly devoted to the 'common good' may have desires and ambitions, hopes and fears, which set him at variance with his neighbor.²⁸

The Children of Light are foolish not only because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the Children of Darkness but because they also underestimate its power among themselves. In their innocence they have overlooked the links that often exist between good and evil:

The fact that the two impulses, though standing in contradiction to each other, are also mixed and compounded with each other on every level of human life, makes the simple distinctions between good and evil, selfishness and altruism, with which liberal idealism has tried to estimate moral and political facts, invalid.²⁹

What was missing from the philosophy of the Children of Light (liberal idealists) was a sense of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, which would have made their efforts toward democracy more realistic. Niebuhr equated Original Sin with the effort of the Children of Light to deny the concept of self-interest.

Nellie Forbush, self-proclaimed "hick from the sticks" and the innocent American abroad, might be described as one of Niebuhr's Children of Light. "A Cockeyed

²⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 11.

²⁹Ibid., 21.

Optimist” is a declaration of her refusal to accept the dark philosophy of pessimists like Niebuhr. She cannot believe that “the human race/Is falling on its face/And hasn’t very far to go.” She cannot accept the prognostications of those who “rant and rave and bellow/That we’re done and we might as well be dead--.” Nellie’s belief that racial prejudice is “born in you” might place her initially among those believing in Original Sin. Her eventual repudiation of this as “piffle” and the overcoming of her prejudice by the power of love, however, places her among the liberal idealists. In this aspect of her character, Nellie was serving as a spokesperson for the ideas of Oscar Hammerstein II who, throughout his life and career, supported liberal causes and considered himself to be a cockeyed optimist. A large dose of sentiment runs throughout his lyrics and libretti. Hammerstein epitomized the idea that “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.” In opposition to this view, Niebuhr would warn us that

The actual behaviour of the nation is cynical. But the creed
of liberal civilization is sentimental.³⁰

In addition to Nellie’s song of optimism, Joe Cable’s explanation of racial prejudice, “You’ve Got to be Taught” also provides an interesting contrast to the ideas of Niebuhr as expressed in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. The essence of the Marine Lieutenant’s song is that prejudice was not inborn, as Nellie thought, but the result of miseducation:

You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear,
You’ve got to be taught from year to year,

³⁰Ibid., 33.

It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear--
You've got to be carefully taught.³¹

The song's thesis stands in direct opposition to Niebuhr's refutation of the belief current among the Children of Light that education was a panacea for the world's problems:

We have regarded racial prejudices as vestiges of barbarism, which an enlightened education was in the process of overcoming. . . . [In this process, American liberals were inclined to draw] . . . the most ambitious universalistic conclusions; we thought modern history might be a process of global assimilation of the races. Our anthropologists rightly insisted that there were no biological roots of inequality between races; and they wrongly drew the conclusion from this fact that racial prejudice is a form of ignorance which could be progressively dispelled by enlightenment.³²

The failure of the liberals, according to Niebuhr, was their belief in the "common convictions of 'men of good-will' who have been enlightened by modern liberal education." The illusions of the Children of Light failed to take into account the variety of cultural and religious convictions and the influence of various historical situations on disparate peoples.

Another difference between Niebuhr's outlook and the optimistic philosophy of *South Pacific* was a belief in the brotherhood and family of man, the culmination of the philosophy of One Worldism that had developed in the 1940s. Nellie and Emile's multicultural family epitomized this goal at the conclusion of the play. This aspect of the musical was related to Oscar Hammerstein's personal involvement with the United World

³¹Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 346.

³²Niebuhr, *Children of Light*, 138-139.

Federalists and belief in a One World philosophy. Niebuhr also challenged this view as symptomatic of the naive and sentimental outlook of the Children of Light:

The confidence of modern secular idealism in the possibility of an easy resolution of the tension between individual and community, or between classes, races and nations is derived from a too optimistic view of human nature. This too generous estimate of human virtue is intimately related to an erroneous estimate of the dimensions of human stature. The conception of human nature which underlies the social and political attitudes of a liberal democratic culture is that of an essentially harmless individual.³³

Liberal culture was too ambitious in scope, believing that it could “unify not only western society but ultimately the whole of human culture. . . .”³⁴ The tragic view of life which was essential to a mature understanding of the world had been blinded by an excess of sentimentality.

Niebuhr’s warning to the cockeyed liberal optimists was that they would be able to build the world community only through acceptance of the realities of the Christian faith:

From the standpoint of such a faith it is possible to deal with the ultimate social problem of human history: the creation of community in world dimensions. . . . The understanding of the Christian faith that the highest achievements of human life are infected with sinful corruption will help men to be prepared for new corruptions

³³Ibid., 21.

³⁴Ibid., 133.

on the level of world community which drive simpler idealists to despair.³⁵

The Vital Center

Five months after *South Pacific* opened on Broadway, there appeared a book that summarized many of Niebuhr's arguments and applied them to the contemporary political situation at home and abroad. This was *The Vital Center* by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. The book was, in truth, a manifesto of liberalism in the era of the Cold War. Here was a prescription for politics in an age of anxiety. In keeping with Niebuhr's caveats, *The Vital Center* was a further critique of the optimistic outlook of liberal progressives, such as Oscar Hammerstein II and Nellie Forbush. Schlesinger quotes D. W. Brogan to demonstrate that although the hearts of progressives might be in the right place,

[Their heads were too often] muddled, full of sentiment, empty of knowledge, living on slogans and clichés, unwilling to realize how complicated is the modern world and that the price of liberty is eternal intellectual vigilance.³⁶

Like Nellie Forbush, the liberal progressive was innocent, but innocence was not sufficient in the Cold War world of 1949:

His sentimentality has softened up the progressive for Communist permeation and conquest. For the most cavalier reasons, he cannot believe that ugly facts underlie fair

³⁵Ibid., 188-189.

³⁶Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), 35.

words. However he looks at it, for example, the USSR keeps coming through as a kind of enlarged Brook Farm community, complete with folk dancing in native costumes, joyous work in the fields and progressive kindergartens.³⁷

The problem with the progressive is that he rejects the tragic view of life which demonstrates that power, even in the hands of the well-intentioned, can be corruptive.

Nellie Forbush versus Consensus Liberalism

From Nellie Forbush's perspective, Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. would belong to that group of pessimists who "rant and rave and bellow/That we're done and we might as well be dead--" or believe that "the human race is falling on its face." Although Nellie believes her racial prejudice to be inherent, her perennial optimism helps her to overcome this stumbling block. Central to that optimism is love. This is Nellie's defense against the harsher realities of the world and it is among those qualities that have endeared her to audiences throughout the years. There is no taint of the concept of Niebuhr's Original Sin surrounding Nellie. Rather, she radiates an innocent and trusting love that is captured in her song "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy" (Act I, Scene 7):

I expect every one
of my crowd to make fun
Of my proud protestations of faith in romance,
And they'll say I'm naive
As a babe to believe
Any fable that I hear from a person in pants! . . .

Fearlessly I'll face them and argue their doubts away,
Loudly I'll sing about flowers and spring!
Flatly I'll stand on my little flat feet and say,

³⁷Ibid., 37.

'Love is a grand and beautiful thing!'
I'm not ashamed to reveal the world-famous feeling I feel.³⁸

At this stage in her relationship, Nellie is experiencing romantic love. Later in the Act (Scene 12), however, it takes a more practical turn when Nellie searches for and finds the common element that unites her and Emile:

Nellie: Emile, you know, my mother says we have nothing in common. But she's wrong. We have something very important in common---very much in common.
Emile: Yes, we're both in love.
Nellie: Yes, but more than that. We're---we're the same kind of people fundamentally---you and me. We appreciate things! We get enthusiastic about things. It's really quite exciting when two people are like that. We're not blasé. You know what I mean?
Emile: We're both knuckleheads, cockeyed optimists.³⁹

They both laugh and then reprise in dialogue fashion the key verses of "A Cockeyed Optimist," confirming in harmony that they are stuck "Like a dope/With a thing called hope" and that they cannot get this out of their hearts. Despite his having killed an evil man in France and his escaping to the South Seas, it is Emile's optimism that propels him to achieve great success.

The world according to Forbush and de Becque is very different from that of Niebuhr and Schlesinger. Neither Nellie nor Emile would be willing to buy into the omnipresent sense of evil that permeated the writings of the two Cold War intellectuals. Theirs was not a politics for an age of anxiety. Rather, they were "still dreaming of

³⁸Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 317.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 329.

Paradise.” Nellie and Emile, like Oscar Hammerstein II, were operating within the realm of the earlier philosophy of liberal progressivism. In *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger characterized this political philosophy as “Doughface progressivism.” The danger of this philosophy in the modern world was “its sentimental belief in progress.”⁴⁰ One who attended a performance of *South Pacific* and then read Schlesinger’s chapter on “The Failure of the Left” would have been presented with an interesting contrast to Nellie’s sky of “bright canary yellow”:

While the sun of optimism was still high in the sky, Dostoievsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sorel, Freud were charting possibilities of depravity. Then, slowly the sun sank in the twentieth century, and practical men, like Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, began to transform depravity into a way of life. Progress had betrayed the progressives. History was abandoning its votaries and unleashing the terror.⁴¹

For Schlesinger and the liberals for whom he would serve as spokesman, the sentimental optimism of the doughface progressives was based upon the incorrect assumption that they could change the hearts and minds of their fellow man. To Schlesinger, man’s problems resulted not from social factors, but from his own penchant for sin and evil. Here were two very different conceptions of man’s place in the modern world.

Although *South Pacific* appeared a few months before *The Vital Center* was published, Schlesinger’s views had previously been made known in the popular press. During the 1940s, his articles were published in *The Saturday Review*, *The Nation*, *The*

⁴⁰Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 38.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 39.

New Republic, and *The New York Times Magazine*. A year prior to the opening of *South Pacific*, *The New York Times* had published an article summarizing his views on liberalism: “Not left, not right, but a vital center.”⁴² Consequently, theatergoers at the early performances already knew the main tenor of Schlesinger’s views.

The Vital Center became the defining text of the movement known as “Consensus Liberalism.” This was an ideological position that sought a middle way between the positions of the left and the right. It represented a retreat from the emphasis upon economic and social reform that had characterized the liberal agenda of the 1930s and early 1940s when it seemed that social improvement was possible. Rodgers and Hammerstein, however, still stuck with that “thing called hope” and endeavored to restore a degree of optimism and confidence to an anxiety-ridden population.

In historical perspective, the pessimistic philosophy of Niebuhr and Schlesinger was more in keeping with the anxiety of the Cold War decades than the upbeat progressivism of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Other cultural productions of the time manifested this darker view of mankind. This was especially prevalent in the genre of postwar Hollywood films known as *film noir*. These motion pictures presented a dark world filled with uncertainty and moral ambiguity. Films like *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* were usually urban crime melodramas, emphasizing mankind’s darker side. *Film noir* was a genre totally in keeping with an age of anxiety. Even the war films of the late 1940s, such as John Wayne’s *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949),

⁴²*New York Times Magazine* (4 April 1948), 7ff.

released the same year *South Pacific* opened on Broadway, had a dark edge to them. This sober look at the war in the Pacific was in marked contrast to the buoyant optimism of the Rodgers and Hammerstein version of World War II.

Still Dreaming of Paradise

Despite the pessimism of Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., I would argue that the dominant optimism in *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* is the core of the American experience. Although it may at times go underground and be eclipsed by pessimism, this optimism continually resurfaces to challenge the dark forces of the world. Psychologist Seymour Sarason in his analysis of “The American Worldview,” reinforces this idea:

If there is anything that characterizes the view of us by others, it is that Americans are optimists. That is to say, if we do not believe in the perfectibility of man, we sure do believe that people can, if only they so desire, dramatically improve themselves and their society. People are essentially good, and the trick is to arrange conditions that allow goodness to flourish. Americans are allergic to the possibility that in man the strength of evil rivals and even subdues the forces of goodness and virtue. The word *trick* refers to the perception that Americans truly believe that one can devise ‘mechanisms’ for overcoming in individuals and nations the destructive or self-defeating consequences of any problem, assuming of course, as Americans do, that where there is a need there is a way.⁴³

Sarason also connects American optimism to a ‘can do’ approach to man and the world.

This ‘can do’ philosophy was characteristic of the World War II years when Rodgers and

⁴³Seymour Bernard Sarason, *Psychoanalysis, General Custer, and the Verdicts of History and Other Essays on Psychology in the Social Scene* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 108.

Hammerstein began their collaboration. It was the motto of the Seabees who would later appear as characters in *South Pacific*. “We can do it” appeared on wartime posters recruiting women for the defense industry. It was this philosophy of determined confidence that shaped the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and captivated the American public.

From Oklahoma! to Oklahoma City:

In 1994 historian Daniel J. Boorstin published an article entitled “I Am Optimistic About America.” In it he revealed that he had achieved his optimistic outlook while growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the 1920s. In this pre-Dust Bowl era, Tulsa billed itself as the “Oil Capital of the World.” In Boorstin’s view, it should have been called “the optimism capital of the world” for the booster pride it instilled in him and its other residents. According to Boorstin, this hopeful attitude has been fundamental to the idea of American Exceptionalism:

A name for a cosmopolitan, optimistic, and humanistic view of history---that the modern world, while profiting from the European inheritance, need not be imprisoned in Old World molds. And, therefore, that the future of the United States and of its people need not be governed by the same expectations or plagued by the same problems that had afflicted people elsewhere.⁴⁴

The association between the optimistic spirit of Oklahoma and American Exceptionalism is an interesting one. When the Oklahoma land rushes took place at the

⁴⁴Daniel J. Boorstin, “I Am Optimistic about America,” *Parade Magazine* (10 July 1994),

end of the 19th century, there was a belief that the frontier was about to be closed forever. As Daniel Boorstin noted, however, the state experienced a boom during the 1920s with the expansion of the oil industry. Then, after the Depression and the Dust Bowl experience, Oklahoma rebounded during World War II with the influx of the military and defense industries into the state.

The most recent example of American optimism associated with the state occurred after the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The horror of the event that shocked the world brought together a spirit of community at both local and national levels. From all over the country rescuers came to lend a hand and to help wash away the evil that had struck down many innocent victims. The cold calculation and mean-spiritedness represented by the accused bomber, Timothy McVeigh, resonated with another loner in the state's history: *Oklahoma!*'s Jud Fry, whose evil deeds included burning families alive in their farmhouses simply because their daughters might have snubbed him. In direct contrast was the image of Oklahoma firefighter Chris Fields, cradling the lifeless body of one-year old Baylee Almon in his arms. This pieta-like photograph appeared on the front page of newspapers and the covers of mass circulation magazines all over the world. Fields, in his simple act of heroism and compassion, was carrying on the tradition of earlier Oklahoma heroes like cowboy Curly McLain who wanted to make the community safe for the woman he loved and for their future family. Timothy McVeigh and Jud Fry--Children of Darkness. Chris Fields and Curly McLain--Children of Light. The American story told by Rodgers and Hammerstein and Niebuhr and Schlesinger in the 1940s is far from over.

CHAPTER 6

AN EXPANDING PARADISE: GEOPOLITICS AT HOME AND ABROAD

Introduction

The titles *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* suggest the geographical character of the two musicals. Although they represent disparate parts of the world, they are linked on the level of geopolitics. Geopolitics is a geographical inquiry which considers space to be a vital component in interpreting the political order of the world. Included in the concept is “the role of the geographical imagination in forming state ideologies [belief systems] which justify specific territorial actions.”¹ The particular geopolitical philosophy operant in the two musicals is the idea of American frontier expansionism. The ideology expressed by *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* mirrored the historical situation of the 1940s which saw an expansion of the American frontier from the West into the Pacific Rim. A paradigm of this ideological direction had been presented to Americans on the eve of the outbreak of world War II in the form of popular culture: the Broadway musical. In order to understand this paradigm, it will be necessary to place it in historical context.

Pageant of the Pacific

In 1939 the United States hosted two World’s Fairs. On the East Coast was the New York World’s Fair with its theme of “The World of Tomorrow,” symbolized by the

¹ “Geopolitics” in *The Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock et al. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 358.

Trylon and Perisphere. Three thousand miles away, San Francisco was the site of the Golden Gate International Exposition, popularly known as the “Pageant of the Pacific.” Although the New York World’s Fair is the more famous, the San Francisco Exposition presented an important ideological message on the level of popular culture. Significantly, the Exposition prophesied America’s expansionist direction in the years following the end of World War II.

Robert Rydell has examined the ideological underpinnings of the Pageant of the Pacific and demonstrated the nature of its economic and foreign policy discourses. According to Rydell, the Fair may be better understood in the context of the political culture of the New Deal. At the center of that culture and of the Exposition itself was a desire to regenerate Depression Era America by restoring the public’s faith in the “vitality of the American political system.”²

The source of America’s regeneration would be through the “realisation of ‘a Western Empire in every sense of the term.’”³ Such an empire would be comprised of a combination of the Western American states and the countries of the Pacific Rim. The creators of the San Francisco Exposition, New Dealers like George Creel, were concerned with improving the social and economic welfare of the Depression-torn West.

²Robert Rydell, “The 1939 San Francisco Golden Gate International Exposition and the Empire of the West,” in *The American West as Seen by Europeans and Americans*, ed. Rob Krues (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1989), 342.

³Ibid.

Promoters of the Exposition envisioned development of an overseas Pacific Empire as a prerequisite for a return of economic abundance to the United States, especially its Western regions. The exhibition of material objects from agricultural and industrial sources conveyed a sense of what the good life might be like. The Golden Gate International Exposition presented a blueprint for such a lifestyle. American westward expansionism would provide “an ideological bridge across the fault lines of the Great Depression.”⁴ Ideologues hoped to build a “community of interest” between the American West and the nations of the Pacific Rim and those European powers such as the French, British, and Dutch who had longstanding colonial interests in the area. The San Francisco Exposition carried with it a revival of earlier American dreams of a trans-Pacific commercial empire. To promote such an empire, exhibits stressed the harmony of interests which existed among the nations of the Pacific Rim. Economic abundance at home would be the result from such an overseas economic empire.

A foretaste of this Pacific-oriented expansionist philosophy had appeared in the nineteenth century writings of poet Walt Whitman. Poems such as “Passage to India” and “A Broadway Pageant” contained abundant examples of an imperial discourse recommending American economic involvement in the Pacific:

I chant the world on my Western Sea; . . .
 I chant the new empire, grander than any before--As in a
 vision it comes to me;
 I chant, projected, a thousand blooming cities yet, in time,
 on those groups of sea island; . . .

⁴Ibid., 343.

I chant commerce opening, the sleep of ages having done
its work--races, reborn, refresh'd. . . .⁵

Whitman had clearly prophesied American history in the twentieth century complete with its capitalist preoccupation with commerce and consumption.

Frontier Expansionism or Empire as a Way of Life

On the eve of World War II, the 1939 Pageant of the Pacific provided a model for Americans. As a means of reversing the effects of the Great Depression, it stressed economic expansion from the American West into the nations of the Pacific Rim. Despite this emphasis, however, it would require World War II to finally turn around the American economy and set it on a course of prosperity and global hegemony in the postwar years.

In the 1950s historian William Appleman Williams developed a model for studying American foreign policy. It confirmed many of the tenets promulgated by the Pageant of the Pacific two decades earlier. Central to Williams' interpretation was the concept of an expanding American frontier.⁶

The idea of an expanding frontier is essential to the meaning and interpretation of both *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. The frontier represented by the musicals is characterized by a moving border which shifts from the American West of *Oklahoma!* to

⁵Walt Whitman's "A Broadway Pageant" quoted in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957, 1950), 46.

⁶William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972); William Appleman Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," in *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November 1955): 379-395.

the Pacific Rim of *South Pacific*. This expanding frontier is representative of the historic situation in the 1940s when America experienced transformation both at home and abroad. During the decade, the American West underwent a significant economic change as a result of the infusion of military-industrial capital. Numerous military installations appeared in the West, and war industry production brought new people as well as money to the area. A picture of positive economic growth replaced the image of a ravaged dust bowl of the West.

U.S. military might in the Pacific theater of the war and the defeat of Japan insured an increased American presence and influence in that area as well. The Pacific Rim became a new economic frontier to be developed by the victorious United States.

For William Appleman Williams, the writings of two individuals from the turn of the century defined the philosophy of frontier expansionism: Frederick Jackson Turner and Brooks Adams. Ironically, the first intimations of this philosophy were presented at an earlier international fair: the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. It was here that Turner delivered an address to the American Historical Association entitled, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner's lecture became a landmark in American historical writing for decades to come, influencing the views of scholars, politicians, and diplomats. The core of Turner's so-called "frontier thesis" was the link he made between democracy and an expanding frontier. The former was a function of the latter. According to Turner, the nation was approaching a crisis since its continental frontiers had closed and there was no place to expand. For Turner

and his followers, land was the lifeblood of democracy. A continuing frontier of free land had been the key to American development and its democratic institutions.

Turner's thesis repudiated earlier historians who suggested that American institutions derived from European ones. Turner, in contrast, proposed an exceptionalist theory of the nation. He believed that the American frontier itself was the major influence upon the American character and society. American optimism, opportunity, and democracy were therefore dependent upon an expanding frontier. Each new frontier helped to renew and regenerate what has been defined as the American Dream.

When Turner presented his "Frontier" address in the 1890s, America was in an economic crisis. Turner suggested to his audience that the closing of the frontier was largely responsible for American problems at the turn of the century. If America was to become healthy again, it needed new frontiers:

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 life.⁷

When wedded to foreign policy, the Turner thesis provided an antidote to America's problems. This connection was elucidated in the 1950s by Williams in an article entitled, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy." According to Williams:

Turner gave Americans a nationalistic world view that eased their doubts, settled their confusions, and justified

⁷William Appleman Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," in *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November 1955), 383.

their aggressiveness. The frontier thesis was a bicarbonate of soda for emotional and intellectual indigestion.⁸

Williams' article went on to show Turner's influence on American presidents from Theodore Roosevelt through Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and their views of America's role in the world:

Turner's thesis thus played an important part in the history of American foreign relations. For his interpretation did much to Americanize and popularize the heretofore alien ideas of economic imperialism and the White Man's Burden.⁹

The second individual important for the development of a frontier expansionist philosophy, according to Williams, was Brooks Adams, brother of writer/historian Henry Adams. He developed a frontier thesis for the world around the time that Turner delivered his 1893 lecture in Chicago. Adams' views were subsequently published in *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1895) and *America's Economic Supremacy* (1900). Adams argued that the way to preserve American democracy was by means of foreign expansion. Adams projected Turner's ideas into the nation's future. Since the continental West was all filled up, America no longer had a frontier. To overcome this impediment, Adams recommended a policy of aggressive expansion by the United States into the Pacific. The goal was to make Asia an economic colony of the United States with America serving as the mistress of a vast Pacific frontier.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 383-384.

The Open Door

The frontier expansionist philosophies of Turner and Adams were supported at the turn of the century by the Open Door Policy articulated in 1898 by John Hay, Secretary of State for the McKinley administration. This trade policy placed the United States on an equal footing with the European powers competing for China's lucrative markets. The annexation of the Philippines around the same time provided the United States with a staging ground for its economic expansion into the Pacific. The Open Door Policy was still a philosophical given on the eve of World War II. Some of this philosophy may have precipitated conflict with Japan, which was also seeking to expand its frontiers.

Both Turner and Adams had reached similar conclusions about the role of the frontier. These conclusions, as described by Williams, suggest how the threads of Americanism, economics, and racism come together in the concept of the frontier:

Adams said that civilization followed the frontier of economic wealth. Turner agreed. Adams called the frontier the zone between 'barbarism and civilization.' Turner used 'savagery and civilization.'¹⁰

The Musicals and Frontier Expansionism

The narrative of *Oklahoma!* is set in the year 1900 when the ideas of Turner and Adams were in circulation. It is significant for this study, therefore, that America was increasing its presence in the Pacific at the turn of the century. American involvement

¹⁰William Appleman Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November 1955): 385.

included the annexation of the Philippines, Hawaii, Samoa, and Guam and intervention in the Chinese Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

In Williams' view, Turner's and Adams' ideas about the frontier provided an American world view and program for expansion and action from 1893 through the 1950s. These two turn-of-the-century thinkers had offered an explanation of America's past and a program for the present.

As Williams shows, there was a significant revival of interest in Turner and Adams in the 1930s and 1940s, coinciding with American expansion in the Pacific region and involvement in both World War II and the ensuing Cold War. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies incorporated the views of both Turner and Adams. In addition, he was a Turnerian in foreign policy, believing in the importance of an expanding American economy by means of the further development of American overseas markets. During World War II, Roosevelt's views underwent a change, especially with regard to the effect such economic expansion might have on indigenous populations. In the first years of the war, he had been a proponent of anticolonialism and advocated democratic freedom for the world's populations. As the war progressed, however, he moved closer to the views of Brooks Adams. By October 1944, he had reaffirmed the Open Door Policy of John Hay. The economic crisis of the Depression and the competitive expansion of Germany and Japan (which threatened American interests and the Open Door) convinced him that any restraint on American development could return the nation to the bleak economic outlook of the 1930s. Such concerns forced him to compromise his anticolonial beliefs. In the last years of the war, Roosevelt began to

equate the new American frontier with the whole world. It was in this context that Williams described World War II as “The War for the American Frontier.”¹¹ Chief among those frontiers attractive to Roosevelt’s New Deal administration was Asia. Since the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, the region had been considered ripe for American overseas expansion. Roosevelt’s desire to keep these foreign markets open to American interests would set the stage for postwar rivalry with the Soviet Union and the resulting Cold War.

Frontier expansionism continued as an operative philosophy during the Truman administration. During the 1940s there was a renewed interest in the writings of Brooks Adams. In 1942 historian Charles Beard provided the introduction for a new edition of *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. In 1947 journalist Marquis Childs was responsible for the republication of *America’s Economic Supremacy*. Childs wrote a sixty-page laudatory introductory essay. In content and tone, Adams’ book mirrored America’s Cold War philosophy. His belief in American expansion in Asia and the Pacific and rivalry with Russia provided intellectual support for contemporary foreign policy planners. The new editions of these turn-of-the-century works became manuals in the hands of Cold War statesmen like George F. Kennan. These policymakers often paraphrased Adams’ ideas in their postwar manifestos. Nelson Rockefeller noted, for example, that “with the closing of our own frontier, there is hope that other frontiers still exist in the world.”¹²

¹¹William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972).

¹²Williams, “Frontier Thesis,” *Pacific Historical Review*: 394.

In the years immediately following the end of the War, President Truman continued the Turner/Adams philosophy of global expansion. The frontier thesis became an integral part of one of the major documents of the Cold War era, the Truman Doctrine:

The Truman Doctrine seemed an almost classic statement of the thesis that the security and well-being of the United States depended upon the successful completion of America's unique mission to defend and extend the frontier democracy throughout the world.¹³

In 1952 Truman delivered a foreign policy speech entitled "The American Frontier." The nation's credo had become one of an expanding economy. Truman and his policy makers hoped that such a policy would be able to solve both American and world problems.

The public discourse of the Pageant of the Pacific Exhibition of 1939/40 and the theories of historian William Appleman Williams are linked in their philosophy of frontier economic expansionism as the key to America's success at home and abroad. The concept of frontier expansionism is also at the center of the linkage between Rodgers and Hammerstein's productions of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* which were contemporary with the decade's (1940s) revival of these ideas. The dates of the narratives of the two musicals are also significant. *Oklahoma!* is set in 1900 and *South Pacific* around 1943/1944.

The chronology of the musicals' narratives places them at key points along the nation's path of frontier expansionism, especially as it relates to America's involvement in the Pacific. The two eras linked to *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* are the Progressive

¹³Ibid., 392.

Era and the New Deal. There are interesting parallels between the two periods.

Roosevelt's New Deal administration continued the philosophy of reform which had begun during the Progressive Era. Both periods witnessed economic crises and sought out new frontiers to revive the national sense of progress and expansion. FDR's New Deal also participated in an expansionist philosophy of history characteristic of turn-of-the-century America.

For Williams, expansion has been the main theme of American history promoting a world view he describes as "empire as a way of life."¹⁴ This inclination towards expansion has been an attempt to evade the central problem of economics and the threat of domestic conflict and violence accompanying periods of economic crisis. America would solve its problems by further expansion. Turner had put forth his thesis around the time of the settlement of the final frontier of the Oklahoma Territory. In Turner's view, the frontier provided America with a safety valve for social and economic problems.

The settings of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* place their narratives along the expanding American frontier. In both cases, the frontier was meant to act as a pathway to Paradise, one via the American West, the other through the South Seas. Both places were sites where Americans felt they could begin anew.

¹⁴William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Oklahoma! and the Frontier West

Nineteen hundred, the year in which *Oklahoma!*'s story takes place, was contemporary with the closing of the continental frontier and American expansionism into the Pacific after the Spanish-American War. In Turner's frontier thesis, land was considered to be the lifeblood of democracy. As the farmers and cowmen of Oklahoma Territory put aside their former conflicts and join forces on the eve of statehood, they sing in unison the finale which explicitly announces that "the land they belong to is grand." The global reach of that outlook is suggested by the presence of Ali Hakim, the Persian peddler, whose trade goods enter into the consumer-based local economy. Although set at the turn of the century, *Oklahoma!* was produced in 1943 at a time when the American West was once again flourishing economically and Americans found themselves stationed on new frontiers around the globe.

The Pageant of the Pacific reminded Americans of the heritage of the western frontier on the eve of World War II. The emphasis upon the importance of travel and tourism in the American West underscored the economic value of that region of the nation. Two exhibits focused on this ambition: the Palace of Vacationland and the Hall of the Western States. The former was sponsored by the Southern Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads. The latter displayed the attractions of eleven of the Western states in the hopes of attracting not only tourists but also businessmen and developers. A subtle link was established between leisure and recreation and the industrialization of the American West:

This is adventure, and adventure is a product of leisure, just as leisure in America is a product of industry's efficiency. So adventure sets the pace for the Fair--leisure, travel, recreation, the yearned-for opportunity to gather into one beautiful setting the color of the Western World, not at work, but living, playing, roaming over its finest country. This makes industry important only as a contributor to Romance. This makes the Fair, instead of a factory manual, a saga of the West - a Pageant of the Pacific.¹⁵

As discussed previously in Chapter 3, *Oklahoma!* participated in the fascination with the American West as a site of travel and tourism in the 1930s and 1940s. The song "Kansas City," where everything was from gas buggies to telephones up to date, presaged the development of the region. The optimistic and enthusiastic singing of the show's finale, *Oklahoma!* emphasized the Territory's strong economic potential on the eve of statehood. This potential would be realized most fully during and after World War II.

World War II and the American West

During the Depression of the 1930s, the West was among those areas which suffered severe economic hardships. Particularly hard hit were the tourist industry, cattle farming and agriculture, as well as oil production. In response to these problems, the federal government undertook a more active role in the West, ultimately transforming the region and leading to increased dependence on the national government. Previously, the West served as a colony for Eastern commercial interests. Federal intervention set the stage for the West's becoming a trend setter rather than merely a source of raw materials

¹⁵Rydell, *The American West*, 353.

for Eastern manufacturers. A diverse range of western economic activities now developed from abundant national resources.

Coupled with government involvement in the West in the 1930s was the area's participation in the cultural movement known as Regionalism. This artistic and literary movement brought the West to national attention. Regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton chronicled the history and national contributions of Western America for the American public. The Regionalist movement and the West provided alternative models for the nation in the interwar period:

Let us remember that the regionalist had become enamored of the West because it seemed to offer an antithesis to what they found wrong in American civilization. They disliked industrialism, standardization, and the phony artificial sophistication of Eastern esthetes, who were often aping European standards that were not rooted directly in American civilization. And so they became enthusiastic over Indian ceremonials or quaint Spanish-American villages.¹⁶

According to Gerald Nash, the Depression stimulated cultural nationalism in the West. Writers, artists, and composers explored the rich historical heritage of the region, establishing a strong sense of the past in the minds of its inhabitants. It was in such a context that Lynn Riggs wrote his plays about the Oklahoma of his youth, including *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which served as the inspiration of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* On the level of popular culture, it should not be forgotten that this was the decade of the popularity of the "B" Western movies and their singing cowboy heroes like

¹⁶Gerald Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 185.

Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. All of this cultural production would become important patriotic symbols of America during the subsequent war years.

It was World War II itself, however, that would have the biggest impact on the West and its importance to the nation. The War was responsible for far-reaching changes in the region. Of greatest significance was the wartime economic boom created by the expansion of federal funding into the area. The influx of large amounts of capital into the West resulted in a rapid economic transformation of the area. The West became the location of a vastly expanded defense industry for the production of such essential armaments as airplanes and ships. Between 1940 and 1945, the federal government spent sixty billion dollars in the Western states. Agriculture as well as industry benefited during the War. Both Western farmers and cattlemen saw an increase in prosperity. As Curly McLain reminded 1940s Broadway audiences, it was a “beautiful mornin’” indeed for the economy of the West and the nation.

The expansion of industry resulted in a population boom as factories recruited employees to fill their production lines. A large number of African Americans and Mexicans migrated to the West to take advantage of these opportunities. The arrival of ethnic and racial minorities resulted in an acceleration of social change, sometimes resulting in clashes such as the “Zoot Suit Riots” of 1943. Population was also affected by the addition of 10 million servicemen and women being stationed in the West during the War. Another 3 million military personnel passed through the Western states on their way home from the Pacific theater of the War. Many of these eventually settled there, influencing the economy of the region.

The West also became a center of innovation and experimentation during the war. Science and technology thrived at major sites such as Los Alamos in New Mexico, CalTech, and the University of California at Berkeley. The West, which had suffered during the Great Depression, now became an essential component of the nation's war effort.

Innovation and experiment were not limited to the sciences. The West also served as a laboratory for experiments in culture and lifestyle, initiating trends which would become national. In the postwar decades, the West pioneered in developing the suburban trend known as the "barbeque culture." This was a culture of affluence which emphasized leisure-time activities. Its focal point was the ranch house style of architecture complete with backyard swimming pool and patio. Here dad reigned over the family barbeque.¹⁷

The West's Vision of Expansion

World War II had brought significant changes to the American West. Most importantly, it provided its population with a renewed belief in an expanding American frontier:

The unused potential of America was being revealed and utilized in the West. And westerners helped to revolutionize the thinking of Americans in other regions. Until 1941 most Americans had been obsessed by a belief in scarcity, in the end of American frontiers, in the limitations on America's expansion. But the experience of World War II changed all that. It opened up new vistas, vistas of virtually unlimited potentials. The realization that seemingly limitless opportunities still lay in the future profoundly altered the

¹⁷Ibid., 230.

thinking of most Americans in 1945, from a negative pessimistic view of the future to one emphasizing hope and great expectations.¹⁸

Westerners now espoused confident optimism about the future of their region and its possibilities. A musical like *Oklahoma!* and its title song paralleled this attitude and supported this sanguine view of the West and nation in contrast to the previous decade's pessimism. The marriage of Curly and Laurey was symbolic of so many couples making their start on the land. Their marriage symbolized the union of the cattlemen and farmers and carried with it geopolitical overtones. Curly's reward for leaving the life of the cowboy (selling his horse, saddle, and sixgun) and settling down with Laurey was to be possession of the land. Returning World War II veterans also traded in their weapons in exchange for GI loans which allowed them to buy a piece of property in the suburbs and build one of the popular new ranch houses. Here they were able to raise their baby boom families on the expanding crabgrass frontier and participate in the years of affluence and consumption which were part of the American dream of Paradise. The domestic portion of the paradigm put forth by the Pageant of the Pacific exposition in 1939 was becoming a reality in postwar America.

Geopolitics of the Western

The geopolitical philosophy of expanding frontiers and economic development represented by *Oklahoma!* place it within the broader context of the American Western. In the story of the American frontier, the cowboy has been an important symbol of

¹⁸Ibid., 204.

American expansion. The cowboy helped to prepare the way for white colonization in the West. The colonial and expansionist philosophy of so many Westerns has been demonstrated by the treatment of Native Americans and Mexicans by the dominant Anglo-American power structure. In the twentieth century, the frontier-expansionist philosophy entered the world of entertainment where the cowboy and the Western film helped to revive and maintain this discourse. The frontier promised an endless horizon for American expansion and development.

American B Western films of the 1930s and 1940s included their own geopolitical discourse. Many of these, like Gene Autry's *South of the Border*, had Mexican or Latin American settings. One Autry film even took the singing cowboy to South Africa in search of horses. The Latin American emphasis in many of the B Westerns of the period was in keeping with the Good Neighbor Policy of the Roosevelt administration.

Among the cowboy songs popular during the 1940s was Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In" introduced by Roy Rogers in the 1944 motion picture, *Hollywood Canteen*. Bing Crosby's wartime recording with the Andrews Sisters sold over a million copies. The song's title is emblematic of the Western and American notion of frontier expansion. It might also be taken as a description of American postwar globalism.

The settlement of Oklahoma in the 1880s and 1890s may be seen as part of the larger national narrative of filling up the continent and expanding America's frontiers. Yancy Cravat, the central character of Edna Ferber's *Cimarron*, expressed such a philosophy in describing the future of the Oklahoma Territory:

It's all to do and we can do it. There's never been a chance like it in the world. We can make a model empire out of this Oklahoma country, with all the mistakes of other pioneers to profit by ¹⁹

In the late nineteenth century, as Oklahoma Territory approached statehood, the cowboy provided a national image for an expansionist frontier ideology. National greatness came to be associated with foreign expansion. The American mission was equated with the Westward movement of civilization and the shaping of the destinies of mankind. Richard Drinnon has suggested that the West was the true site of the beginnings of American imperialism and its expansionist thrust, a thrust which comes to a halt in the jungles of Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰

Ironically, Oklahomans often provided the manpower for American expansion abroad. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo tells the story of William Jones, an Oklahoma cowboy who, with others from the Territory, joined the ranks of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War. Jones eventually found himself in the Philippines where he helped fight the battles which ultimately led to American annexation of the islands. Jones later became an anthropologist and returned to the Philippines where he spent his life studying and reporting on the native populations and

¹⁹Ferber, *Cimarron*, 116.

²⁰Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (New York: New American Library, 1980).

the ways of their traditional cultures. The United States Government relied upon such information as an aid to overseeing their new informal empire.²¹

During World War II, the American West became an empire whose tentacles spread overseas and around the globe. According to Donald Worster, the postwar West became “a principal seat of the world-circling American empire.”²² The nation’s move toward corporatism and the development of the West were contemporary events. In this period, the “Orient” became a sequel to the history of the West. American trade and markets would now further expand into the Pacific Rim in the postwar world.

South Pacific and the Asian/Pacific Frontier

South Pacific, like *Oklahoma!*, is linked to the presence of a frontier expansionist philosophy in the 1940s. The musical’s Pacific setting and its Asian characters enhance these connections. First, there is Bloody Mary, Tonkinese entrepreneur extraordinaire, and the economic rivalry which defines her relationship with the French planters and American military personnel on the island. By the time individuals such as Luther Billis had arrived, they were carrying with them a concept of the frontier not as a final destination but as a location inviting entrance. Billis and his Seabee comrades clearly exemplify such an invasion. The American military which constantly close down Mary’s

²¹Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, 82-85.

²²Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 15.

operations, forcing her to move down the beach, represent the flexing muscles of America's expanding global power.

British historian Christopher Thorne, developing the ideas of William Appleman Williams, has also related Turner's frontier thesis to American expansion and development in Asia and the Pacific.²³ Thorne's examination follows America's frontier path from World War II to the jungles of Vietnam. As we have seen, the frontier thesis had been incorporated by 1940s government ideologues in developing a Cold War foreign policy. In their minds, the ever-expanding frontier became essential to America's regeneration and perennial rebirth.

The frontier mentality was related to the American sense of mission, a belief that it was the nation's duty to civilize and redeem the world. Americans were convinced of their goodness and saw themselves as purveyors of enlightenment and virtue to the "dark corners" of the world. They believed that this vision of goodness could be enlarged to encompass the globe. It was the duty of Americans to bestow their goodness upon the "less fortunate peoples" of the world.

Such cultural imperialism and national hubris would eventually lead Americans to confront the loss of their innocence and a Neibuhrian awareness of Original Sin. This arrogance would produce the concept of the "ugly American" in the minds of many of the world's colonial peoples.

²³Christopher Thorne, "American Political Culture and the Asian Frontier, 1943-1973," in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 72 (1986): 339-394.

During the 1940s and largely as a result of World War II, Asia and the Pacific took on increased importance for Americans. The region's strategic value played a major consideration in the nation's geopolitical equation. By 1949, when *South Pacific* opened on Broadway, Southeast Asia had been labeled as a place which must be preserved from the spread of Communism. American government officials agreed that a line must be drawn in Asia. Such a philosophy undergirded the decision to provide aid and assistance to the French in Indochina in the 1950s. Carried to its logical conclusion in the 1960s, it promulgated the erroneous assumption that the life and death of the American nation was at stake in Vietnam.

U.S. Interests in the Pacific and Indochina

United States activity in the Pacific and Asia during World War II resulted in the publication of numerous books and articles attempting to explain the region to Americans. The abundance of these materials testifies to the new interest in the area. Many of these items dealt with geopolitical and foreign policy issues. Among those of special relevance to this study are those concerning American perceptions of Southeast Asia and Indochina, the original home of Bloody Mary and Liat. It was this region which would play a significant role in the destiny of postwar America and the fate of the American Dream.

Among the books published during this time were: Roger Levy, *French Interests and Policies in the Far East* (1941), Rupert Emerson, *Government and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (1942), Olov Janse, *The Peoples of French Indochina* (Smithsonian

Institute War Background Studies) (1944), Philip Jaffe, *New Frontiers in Asia: A Challenge to the West* (1945), Thomas Bisson, *America's Far Eastern Policy* (1945), *The United States Moves Across the Pacific: The A.B.C.'s of the American Problem in the Western Pacific and the Far East* (1945), *The Treatment of Asia in American Textbooks* (1946), Ralph Coniston, *The Future of Freedom in the Orient* (1947), *America's Future in the Pacific* (papers from a 1946 conference) (1947), Harold Isaacs, *New Cycle in Asia* (documents from 1943-1947), Harold Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (1947), J.C. Furnas *Anatomy of Paradise: Hawaii and the Islands of the South Seas* (1948), and in 1949 *The New World of South East Asia* by Lennox Mills and John K. Fairbanks' *Next Step in Asia*. The titles reveal the slant of American expansionist thought at the time.

Among the most important of these 1940s publications was Harold Isaacs' *No Peace for Asia* which contained a prophetic section on America and Indochina. The book was republished in 1967 with a new introduction by the author indicating its relevance to an America mired in the war in Vietnam. Isaacs was *Newsweek's* wartime correspondent in China and had an in-depth familiarity with American involvement in Asia. His book presented an essentially gloomy picture of America's and Russia's roles in the region. The Cold War power politics of the two nations was carried out at the expense of the Asian nations and their people.

Isaacs was supportive of the struggling young Republic of Vietnam in Indochina and its leader Ho Chi Minh. In 1945 he witnessed first-hand the revolt of the Indochinese against the return of corrupt French imperial rule. An excerpt from the book entitled

"Indo-China: A Fight for Freedom" was published in the February 3, 1947 issue of *New Republic*:

Since Japan's collapse, France has been engaged in an attempt to regain a valuable piece of property she lost during the war. It consisted of a little more than a quarter of a million square miles of rich real estate located at the southeastern tip of the continent of Asia. It produced rice and coal and rubber and silk and pepper and a host of foods and minerals, all in profitable quantities. It was inhabited by nearly 24 million people who toiled mainly for the profit and comfort of Frenchmen and the rest of the time grubbed in the earth for a bare sustenance for themselves.²⁴

South Pacific's Bloody Mary and Liat were among those Indochinese laboring for France as indentured workers in the French-controlled New Hebrides and New Caledonia.

Bloody Mary's resistance represented in microcosm the revolt of her countrymen against their imperial occupiers.

Chapter 10 of *No Peace for Asia* presented Isaacs' analysis of American involvement in Asia, past and present:

Victory over Japan made the United States the greatest of the Pacific powers. The moment of the signing of Japan's surrender on the deck of the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay marked the apex, the high point of American might, American power, American decision in the Far East. It marked the end of one historical epoch and the beginning of another. For an interval that could not, by its very nature, last long, the United States held in its hands the power of decision affecting directly the fate of the rest of the world. It was a time for a great turning in human affairs. In their suffering, their fatigue, their vast inarticulate aspiration, the peoples of Asia were ready for it. They were ready to see

²⁴Harold R. Isaacs, "Indo-China: A Fight for Freedom," in *New Republic* (3 February 1947), 12.

America wave a magic wand that would turn darkness into light, permanent war into the beginnings of permanent peace. If the American Dream had any reality, now was the time for it to manifest itself. If American professions and good intentions were valid, now was the time to make them good. If the American system of capitalist democracy had within it the promise of fruitful growth for the world, here, perhaps, was the final opportunity to prove it.²⁵

Isaacs' view of the situation was a gloomy and realistic one. He knew the minds of the Bloody Marys of the world and of the Americans who now controlled their fate:

But the United States was not only the victor. It was also the victim of its own past, its social and political patterns and limitations, its governing conceptions of the way to organize the world. The history of power relations in Asia over a hundred years had culminated in the struggle between Japan and the United States for mastery. This war, however, had again placed on the world agenda far more than the question of who should conquer and be master in the house. It placed before us once more the whole issue of conquest and power and profit as the basis for existence on the planet. The American victory in the Pacific war was nothing less than the American opportunity to face up to that issue. Nothing in the American record of past or present, however, suggested that it was ready or able to assume the immense responsibility thus imposed upon it.²⁶

Indochina, the original home of *South Pacific's* Bloody Mary and Liat, had been viewed as the key to American interests in the Pacific since the early years of World War II. America's eventual involvement in the war can be traced partly to events in Indochina. In 1941 President Roosevelt had become increasingly concerned about Japanese expansion in the Far East. When the Japanese occupied Indochina, he froze their

²⁵Harold R. Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1947, 1967), 215.

²⁶Ibid.

financial assets in the United States. This precipitated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which brought America fully into the war against the Axis powers. What happened in Indochina played an important part in bringing America directly into World War II.

By 1945 American personnel were in Indochina aiding guerilla forces in ousting the Japanese occupiers. These Americans, consisting largely of OSS teams sent in from China, established feelings of goodwill among the nationalists, including their leader Ho Chi Minh. In July of 1945, OSS representatives met with Ho in Tonkin Province, a nationalist stronghold. For the Viet Minh (the Indochinese nationalists), the Americans represented a symbol of liberation from French colonialism. Despite OSS optimism and good relations with Ho Chi Minh, the alliance would quickly fall apart in a scenario reminiscent of the treatment of Bloody Mary and Liat in the musical.

The inclusion of these two Tonkinese (Indochinese) characters in *South Pacific* made it a very timely production for the late 1940s. American involvement in Southeast Asia and Indochina were concurrently evolving when theater audiences first met Bloody Mary and Liat. Americans were aware of these events the popular press covered in the late 1940s. For example, several articles on Indochina and its struggle against the French appeared in *Life* between 1947 and 1949. In the December 29, 1947 issue, William Bullitt, former Ambassador to the Soviet Union and a staunch anti-Communist, wrote an essay entitled "The Saddest War" in which he recommended American intervention if the French and Indochinese could not work out their problems:

Far larger issues are at stake than the privilege of moneyed interests in Vietnam, however great may be their influence in Paris. As the immediate neighbor of South China, Viet Nam is vital to the defense of the Far East against the aggressions of Soviet Imperialism.²⁷

A more liberal view appeared in the March 7, 1949 *Life* (exactly one month before *South Pacific* opened on Broadway). The anonymous author of a text accompanying a picture essay on Indochina stated that:

Indo-China's plight crystallizes the whole question of empire in the 20th century: does France, weak at home, have the right or capacity to rule 125 million Asiatics, Africans and Pacific Islanders?²⁸

This was a question which very well could have crossed the minds of *South Pacific*'s audience as they watched the story of Bloody Mary unfold. During the Cold War years, Broadway would, on a number of occasions, face East to explore this increasingly important realm: *The King & I* (1951), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1958), and *A Majority of One* (1959).

With the defeat of the Japanese and the weakened condition of the European powers (Britain, France, and the Netherlands) in the area, the United States emerged as the dominant power in the Pacific. The flush of victory ended the American sense of isolationism and encouraged a new-found responsibility for other nations and peoples all over the globe. This mood was clearly expressed in President Truman's inaugural address delivered three months prior to the opening of *South Pacific*:

²⁷William C. Bullitt, "The Saddest War," in *Life* (29 December 1947), 69.

²⁸"Indo-China" in *Life* (7 March 1949), 97.

The supreme need of our time is for men to learn to live together in peace and harmony. . . . The peoples of the earth face the future with grave uncertainty composed almost equally of great hopes and fears. In this time of doubt, they look to the United States as never before for good will, strength, and wise leadership.²⁹

In 1945 Edward Steichen mounted a jingoistic exhibition of photographs for New York's Museum of Modern Art. Entitled "Power in the Pacific," it symbolically and visually showed a nation flexing its muscles in the new power game of East and West. This sense of awesome power is hinted at in the next-to-last scene of Act II of *South Pacific*, which shows American forces gathering men and material for "Operation Alligator," an assault against the Japanese. Here was the "Arsenal of Democracy" in action.

Bloody Mary's Anger

One year after the end of World War II, the United States exploded two atomic bombs on the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The meaning of this exercise was perhaps best expressed by one of the islanders forcibly removed from his birthplace:

They said they needed to do this to keep all the other nations under control. This is why they dropped the bomb on my island.³⁰

²⁹U.S. President. *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States from George Washington 1789 to Lyndon Baines Johnson 1965* (Washington, DC: U.S. G.P.O., 1965), 251-252.

³⁰*Bikini Radio* (P.B.S., 1988).

At the end of World War II, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal described the Pacific as a “great American Lake.” Security became part of the operative philosophy of the time and reflected American desire to establish an outward-reaching defense perimeter. It therefore became important for the United States to retain military installations throughout the Pacific as strategic bases. At the heart of this defensive perimeter was control of the former Japanese island mandates in Micronesia: the Marshall, Mariana, and Caroline Islands. The United States wanted to prevent a recurrence of the situation which had led to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. United States goals in the region subsequently became entwined in the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union and the rise of a Communist government in China. In 1945 the White House was already being warned about the potential Soviet threat to Asia.

Like Nellie Forbush, America was losing both its provincialism and innocence in the new world of power politics being practiced among the peoples of what is now described as the Third World. Like Nellie, America was optimistic that it was doing only good in this exotic realm. Unfortunately, these good intentions became absorbed by the Cold War imprisonment of fear which saw the world as a military playground. In this environment, the United States abandoned the noble ideas upon which it had been founded and substituted force for freedom. Third World peoples in Asia and the Pacific were undergoing nationalistic struggles often tied to Communist movements in order to free themselves from the former colonial powers such as England, France, and the Netherlands. Instead of supporting these movements toward freedom, the United States saw them as a potential threat to the privileged American lifestyle. This mood was

enhanced by a fear of the unknown as represented by difference and otherness. Nellie's uncertainty and fear were now being enacted on a national and global scale.

American postwar diplomacy was therefore often motivated by a policy based upon fear. Such a policy would have important repercussions for the Bloody Marys and Liats of the world. The war had awakened the hopes of colonial peoples that they might at last be freed from the control of the European powers. Such anti-colonial sentiments had found support in the Roosevelt administration, but after his death in 1945 and the rise of a Cold War mentality, these hopes were dashed. Bloody Mary was representative of these Third World nationalists in the search for freedom and independence from their European masters. They looked to the United States to support their anti-colonialist desires. Part of this support involved easing out the formal colonial powers such as France and Britain. Such a task provided the United States with a dilemma: how to balance liberation for the colonial peoples with a desire to maintain a spirit of cooperation with its European allies. It would be in Indochina, Bloody Mary's place of birth, that this balancing act would be severely tested.

The people of Indochina grew to hate their French masters and looked to the United States to extricate them from foreign control and help them reclaim their lands. Such hopes were fueled by statements made by members of the Roosevelt administration. In 1942 Under-Secretary of State Sumner Wells said, in a Memorial Day address:

If this war is in fact a war for the liberation of peoples it must assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world as well as in the world of the Americas. Our victory must bring in its train the liberation of all peoples.

Discrimination between peoples because of their race, creed, or color must be abolished.

The age of imperialism is ended. The right of a people to their freedom must be recognized, as the civilized world long since recognized the right of an individual to his personal freedom. The principles of the Atlantic Charter must be guaranteed to the world as a whole--in all oceans and in all continents.³¹

The Japanese had provided a model for the Indochinese and other nationalist movements in Asia and the Pacific. The Japanese had begun their militaristic adventure under the banner of “Asia for the Asians.” Their rapid defeat of the white European colonial powers in the region provided inspiration for all those Third World Peoples who wished to throw off the chains of their oppressors. At first, it looked like the United States was going to carry out its pledge to rid the region of colonialism. Instead, America turned its back on these promises and ended up restoring the colonial powers. Asian nationalists like Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh believed that American aims and theirs would coincide. These Asians assumed that America stood for change and would bring liberty and freedom to their lands. Like Bloody Mary and Liat, they found that this was more myth than reality:

In the broadest and most fundamental sense, the chief American failure was the failure to stand for change. The United States had spoken for a new order of things. It acted now for the old order of things. By what it did and by what it failed to do, the American victory brought no beginning of a solution to the problems of dislocation, upheaval, conflict, and nationalist aspiration. In the struggles that

³¹Ralph Coniston, *The Future of Freedom in the Orient* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1947), 195.

erupted among colonial peoples to prevent the return of their old masters, the United States stood in fact not with the rebelling subjects but with the returning rulers. In every actual political situation in which it became involved, the United States stood not with the partisans of social change but with the defenders of archaic conservatism.³²

In the end the United States provided economic and military support to France and Britain to help them put down the nationalist uprisings in Indochina and Indonesia. Like Lt. Cable in his relationship with Liat, the United States failed to live up to its promises. On October 27, 1945, President Truman had made an important foreign policy speech outlining twelve points in support of the colonial peoples of the world. Among these points Bloody Mary would have found the following:

We believe that all peoples who are prepared for self-government should be permitted to choose their own form of government by their own freely expressed choice without interference from any foreign source. That is true in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, as well as in the Western Hemisphere. . . .³³

In the jungles of Tonkin China, these words had a hollow ring to those Indochinese fighting against French troops supplied with American uniforms and weapons. These Asian freedom fighters would have gladly joined Bloody Mary in smashing Cable's watch to pieces. The Americans left the people of Asia, like Cable left Liat, to cope with misery and disillusion. The republication of *No Peace for Asia* during the Vietnam War gave food for thought to the generation which might have included a son or daughter

³²Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia*, 235.

³³*Ibid.*, 238.

fathered by Lt. Joseph Cable. This was especially true in their response to the foreign policy legacy of their parents' generation.

American Hubris and Paternalism

In America's relationship with the peoples of the Third World as represented by Bloody Mary and Liat, we find an element of arrogance and hubris. Christopher Thorne has described America's postwar treatment of Asia as characterized by a belief that "other nations are boxcars to be shunted around by the American locomotive."³⁴ Such a process aptly describes the situation of Bloody Mary as portrayed in *South Pacific*. She is constantly being pushed around from place to place on the island by the American forces. Mary's Americanization at the hands of the Marines and sailors also symbolizes the geopolitical dream of American global suasion recommended by Henry Luce in his 1941 *Life* essay "The American Century."³⁵ Luce told his readers that it was America's duty and opportunity to exert the full impact of its influence upon the world. In this environment the United States was acting as a mentor to those peoples who had achieved or were on the verge of achieving independence. In this relationship, the United States took on a paternalistic role. The United States initially became a "father figure" to colonial peoples who admired American altruism and business acumen. This paternalistic view was based upon a belief that the world was waiting to be made over in America's

³⁴Thorne, "American Political Culture" in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 72 (1986), 373-374.

³⁵Henry Luce, "The American Century" in *The Ideas of Henry Luce*, ed. John K. Jessup (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

image. Since the days of the annexation of the Philippines at the turn of the century, it became the mission of the United States to “enlighten” supposedly “backward” peoples. This was an extension of Rudyard Kipling’s notion of the “white man’s burden.” It was reinforced by a belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. It became the duty of Americans to lead these people through a process of regeneration. This relationship is represented symbolically in *South Pacific* by the guardianship of Ngana and Jerome by Emile and Nellie. They stand in symbolically for France and the United States as caretakers of the “childlike” races of the globe. As the major plantation owner on the island with a staff of servants, Emile, although a believer in the Declaration of Independence and the Rights of Man, is part of the French colonial system which had administered the islands before the war.

America the Deceiver

Bloody Mary’s response to Cable’s abandonment of her daughter Liat is symbolic of the anger of those Third World peoples who felt they had been deceived by America with its proclamations of support and friendship. In the postwar environment, the peoples of the Third World would suffer at the hands of international power politics. In this scenario, the United States would side eventually with the European powers in a paranoid Cold War response to a predatory world Communism represented by the Soviet Union and China. This strategy was supported by a belief that the colonial peoples were childlike and not ready for independence. Western ideologues spoke of the danger of the

awakening masses and their desire for independence in a world characterized by the struggle between the light of Democracy and the darkness of Communism.

The United States, in siding with their European allies, incurred the wrath and displeasure of the colonial peoples of Asia. In this atmosphere, philosophies of discontent would surely flower among the Bloody Marys of the world. Here were the seeds of the postwar anger which rimland peoples felt toward the United States. Individuals like Ho Chi Minh cultivated American friendship in the belief that the United States would champion the aspirations of colonial peoples such as the Vietnamese. Ho even believed that American economic investment and technology would be of benefit to his country. In this spirit of trust and hope, Ho modeled the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence on that of the United States. Thus, the initial attitude of the Vietnamese was to view the Americans as liberators and as champions of the oppressed peoples of the world. In the end the Americans abandoned the Vietnamese for the French whom they needed in their struggle against Communism.

Around the time that Americans were meeting with Ho Chi Minh in Tonkin, China, more ominous interactions were taking place between other Americans and the Tonkinese in the New Hebrides where *South Pacific* was set. These events were reported by James Michener in two books published in 1951: *Return to Paradise* and *The Voice of Asia*.

Both books include thoughts about the situation in Indochina and America's exercise of power in the Pacific, accompanied by warnings about the dangers of hubris and optimism concerning Asia:

In the New Hebrides the Tonkinese bide their time remembering that the French have broken promises regarding repatriation and listening with somber joy to the secret radio reports of French defeats in Tonkin-China. Asia is everywhere.³⁶

In *The Voice of Asia*, we are told the true story of Ho Quoy, an indentured Tonkinese worker in the New Hebrides. Ho and his compatriots were prevented by the French from returning to their native Indochina even though their work contracts had run out during the war. As a result, a resistance movement developed on the islands. On July 4, 1945, a number of the Tonkinese workers assembled at the plantation where Ho worked. In fear, the French owner opened fire on the mob, killing two of the Tonkinese and wounding many others:

A kind of civil war followed, there at the edge of the great jungle. American troops being white naturally sided with the French and helped put down the rebellion, and an armed truce was arranged.³⁷

American support for the French would ultimately overshadow that for the Indochinese nationalists. In the context of Cold War geopolitics, France was seen as a more valuable ally than the Vietnamese. Thus, by October of 1945, the United States was now ready to accept the restoration of French sovereignty in the region.

³⁶James A. Michener, *Return to Paradise* (New York: Ballantine, 1982, 1951), 416.

³⁷James A. Michener, *The Voice of Asia* (New York: Random House, 1951), 211.

America and the Colonial Powers

American frontier expansion in the Pacific during the 1940s involved a degree of complicity with the European colonial powers such as France and Great Britain. The link with France was especially significant in terms of America's relationship to Indochina. This relationship is mirrored in *South Pacific* through the characters of Emile, Nellie, Cable, Liat, and Bloody Mary. Originally, the United States had been committed to a policy of ending colonial rule in the Pacific. However, in order to support its own expanding economy, the United States compromised its original anti-colonial policies. Americans found themselves switching their support from the peoples they had come to liberate to allies such as France and Britain, the former masters of these people.

American support for the European powers may also be explained by the onset of the Cold War and the need to project a united front against the new threat of World Communism. A closer examination of the situation, however, reveals the economic underpinning that William Appleman Williams has traced back to the Open Door policies of the turn of the century. In the 1940s, the United States was shifting its frontier from the continent to an overseas economic empire. Expansion was once again seen as a safety valve for solving the nation's problems. In the postwar period, with the reduction of the defense industries, there were fears of a return to Depression-era economic conditions. The American viewpoint, according to Williams, was characterized by a belief that the nation's prosperity and freedom were dependent upon continued expansion of its economic and ideological system through a policy of open door overseas trade. Williams traced this American *Weltanschauung* (world view) from the 1890s through the 1960s,

suggesting that agricultural interests and corporate capital were aggressively seeking overseas markets for their produce. The 1898 war with Spain may be seen as a war for a free market in Asia. American acquisition of the Philippines at this time provided a Pacific base for this economic strategy. America's path to the jungles of Indochina was developing.³⁸

Combined with the American belief in global open door expansion was a tendency to project its own image onto the world at the expense of indigenous populations. In the postwar period, American foreign policy often amounted to the forcing of American beliefs and institutions on the rising peoples of what would come to be called the Third World. Such behavior was captured in the 1958 best-selling novel *The Ugly American* by Lederer and Burdick. The film version of *South Pacific* also appeared in that year. Bloody Mary's treatment at the hands of the U.S. Navy and Marines in the 1949 and 1958 versions of the musical provided Americans with a glimpse of this negative view of American behavior. In this context, Mary's anger and the smashing of Cable's watch acquires additional meaning.

The economic aspects of the narratives of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* with their fascination with consumerism also become more meaningful in relation to Williams's description of the American philosophy of frontier capitalist expansion. The lifeblood of this political economy was the necessity of foreign markets to absorb the increasing surplus of agricultural and industrial products. An economy driven by industrial

³⁸William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972).

capitalism could be plagued by problems of overdevelopment and overproduction. All that corn and those waving fields of Oklahoma wheat had to be sold somewhere. Luther Billis's brethren in the world of manufacturing and commerce eagerly sought out the rich markets of Asia for the products of their latest money-making schemes. The Pacific and Asia became a new American frontier as a market outlet for American goods and ideas.

America and France

After World War II, the advances made by Communist forces in China fueled American fears. Indochina was considered to have strategic importance through its geographic link to American bases in the Pacific. Thus, when the French wanted to return to Indochina, they were aided by the Americans who wanted the region to serve as a buffer to the spread of Communism. The French troops who invaded Indochina in March, 1946 wore American-made uniforms, fought with American weapons, and were transported by American ships and planes.

In the pairing of Emile de Becque and Nellie Forbush as a romantic couple in *South Pacific*, we see a geopolitical model representative of the historic situation at the time. Emile is representative of European experience and age. Nellie typifies American innocence and youth. Their union mirrors the course of postwar foreign policy events in which the United States eventually sided with and supported the French in their efforts to put down resistance in Indochina.

During this period, France, whose prestige and power had been eroded as a result of World War II, found itself in a secondary position vis-a-vis the United States. This was

a time of Americanization or *americanisme*, in which French *civilisation* was challenged by an American popular culture defined in terms of mass production and mass consumption. French intellectuals like Jean Paul Sartre disdained what they saw as a shallow American optimism, the kind of spirit represented by “cockeyed optimist” Nellie Forbush.

Nellie and Emile also mirror the relationship between American and European culture in the postwar 1940s. The site of this cultural relationship was the world of art. In the postwar years, American political hegemony was paralleled by American cultural superiority in which New York would replace Paris as the culture capital of the world. At the center of this new cultural power was the artistic movement known as Abstract Expressionism. This type of art was seen by Europeans as rough and uncultured. In the 1960s, American critic Harold Rosenberg compared Jackson Pollock, the most famous of the Abstract Expressionists, to Daniel Boone, saying that he resembled the “ring-tailed roarer” of the American West who liked to go to saloons and play at bustin’ up the joint.”³⁹ Pollock, born in Wyoming, was in many respects a cowboy artist, a Curly McLain with a paintbrush. Early photographs show him dressed in western clothing, including a cowboy hat and a sixgun strapped around his waist. Rosenberg suggested that Pollock frequently posed as a cowboy to provide himself with that traditional American courage which he needed to challenge the European masters, especially the tradition represented by the cultured French. Rosenberg went on to describe Pollock as a

³⁹Rosenberg quoted in Annette Cox, *Art-as-Politics: The Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 129.

“twentieth-century abstract Buffalo Bill.”⁴⁰ This is an interesting comment in the context of the spread of Americanism abroad. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show had an international following which helped popularize the American cowboy image in Europe. Rosenberg divided American artists (both literary and visual) into “Redcoats” and “Coonskinners.” The Redcoats relied upon European models. In contrast, the Coonskinners (i.e., Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill, the American Cowboy, and Jackson Pollock) did not follow foreign (i.e., European) paradigms. They were pioneers who were not afraid to blaze new trails. The rugged individualism championed by Rosenberg had its roots on the same American western frontier portrayed in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*.⁴¹

For Rosenberg, American innocence was a useful trait for the artist seeking to challenge European hegemony. Nellie Forbush was a representative of such innocence abroad in a global setting.

The cultural relationship between postwar America and France, however, was secondary to foreign policy which saw the union of French and American interests in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. This relationship, with its overtones of colonialism, put the United States on a collision course with the peoples of Indochina. In the 1960s this path would test American optimism at home and abroad and call into question the nation’s philosophy of frontier expansionism.

⁴⁰Ibid., 129.

⁴¹Ibid., see Chapter 7: “Playing Cowboy: The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg.”

Cable and Liat

The love affair between Lt. Cable and Liat, the other romantic couple in *South Pacific*, is also fraught with geopolitical overtones. The key to the characters' geopolitical discourse appears in the song "Younger than Springtime" which is sung by Cable to Liat after they have made love in a hut on the exotic island of Bali Ha'i. Holding the young Tonkinese in his arms, Cable sings a song which, first of all, conveys a sense of rebirth and energy passing from Liat to Cable:

And when your youth and joy invade my arms
and fill my heart, as now they do.
Then younger than springtime am I . . .⁴²

This transfer of energy may be taken at face value as the "electricity" which exists between the two passionate lovers. On another level, however, this lyric may be considered in a geopolitical context related to America's quest for new frontiers. Turner had described the frontier as "a magic fountain of youth in which America continually bathed and rejuvenated."⁴³ This sense of rebirth is central to the lyric just quoted above. "Younger than Springtime" becomes an imperial ballad. Liat, the object of the song, may stand in for Asia (frequently represented as a desirable woman in Western popular culture), the new frontier for which America longs. This new Asian frontier would be a shot in the arm for an expanding global power. The imperial tone of the young Marine's song appears in its very first line:

⁴²Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 325.

⁴³Turner quoted in William Appleman Williams, "The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy," in *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November 1955), 383.

I touch your hand,
 And my arms grow strong,
 Like a pair of birds
 That burst with song.
 My eyes look down
 At your lovely face.
 And I *hold the world*
 In my embrace.⁴⁴

Geopolitics of the Frontier

The American frontier expanded in the period between the 1890s and the 1940s from the continental West to the Pacific Rim and Asia. This trajectory of expansion is reenacted by the narratives of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. Significantly, the narratives are linked by the concept of the frontier and American attitudes toward the indigenous inhabitants of both regions. Oklahoma had been the home of the redman, and the South Pacific region was populated by Polynesians, Melanesians, Micronesians, and a variety of Asians.

Although separated by continents, Native Americans and Asian/Pacific Islanders were often lumped together by their Western masters. Richard Drinnon, in *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building*, has drawn a link between the Puritan's first confrontation with Native Americans and United States involvement in Southeast Asia. Drinnon has pointed out two constants in American foreign policy which explain the similarity of treatment of colonized peoples. These are a racist attitude which views non-whites as childlike inferiors or cannibalistic savages. This has been coupled

⁴⁴Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 324 or 329.

with a desire for new land and expanding economic markets. It was along the moving American frontier that such conflict has developed.⁴⁵

Indochina and the Indian Wars

During the war in Vietnam, reference was often made to Native Americans and their relationship to white American culture. The enemy-infested jungles of Vietnam were referred to by American military personnel as “Indian Country.” Here frontier fear was transformed from Redskins to Red Communists.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the frontier of Frederick Jackson Turner had witnessed the battle of savagery and civilization. Americans of the time felt they were engaged in an heroic conquest of an inferior people. At the turn of the century, such frontier views were transplanted to the Pacific where they were applied against the resistance of Filipino nationalists. In the 1940s and subsequent postwar decades, a racist ideology derived from earlier “Indian hating” ancestors led Americans to the belief that

the innate superiority of what ‘white’ America, having civilized the barbarians on its own continental frontier, now had to bestow upon the East. . . .⁴⁶

The path from *Oklahoma!* to *South Pacific* was strewn with the lives and bodies of those who would one day bring doubt to those who had formulated and carried out such policies against them. Michael Herr, author of *Dispatches*, has described Vietnam as “the

⁴⁵See Drinnon, *Facing West*.

⁴⁶Thorne, “American Political Culture” in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 359.

'turnaround point' for the drive westwards along the 'Trail of Tears'.⁴⁷ That trail ran through the narratives of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the geopolitical nature of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. We have seen how the geographical imagination has been important in forming an American national belief system which has been used to justify specific territorial actions. The operative political discourse of the 1940s present in the musicals was the concept of an expanding frontier. This concept has been at the heart of the American Dream and the search for Paradise. The frontier means optimism, opportunity, rebirth, rejuvenation--a fountain of youth for the nation. The expanding frontier and the dream of an earthly paradise are at the heart of Rodgers and Hammerstein's dramatic examination. The musicals acted as morality plays rehearsing these issues for 1940s audiences. Contained in Rodgers and Hammerstein's narrative of *South Pacific* are the beginnings of a criticism of the frontier mentality, especially in its presentation of the negative results of Americanization (Bloody Mary) and the specter of racial prejudice (Nellie and Joe). Rodgers and Hammerstein, however, are able to smooth over the dark side of the American Dream through the tenets of a liberal optimism espoused through the character of Nellie Forbush. This became the strategy of the democratic administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson which ultimately failed during the 1960s in the riot-torn streets of America and the jungles of Vietnam.

⁴⁷Ibid., 342.

We began our examination of the geopolitical aspects of *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* by considering their relationship to the 1939 World's Fair held in San Francisco: The Pageant of the Pacific. Significantly, the titles of the two Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals may be inserted into Robert Rydell's comments about the meaning of this West coast fair:

Living the good life in the American West [*Oklahoma!*]
would be unthinkable apart from the increased American
involvement in Pacific affairs [*South Pacific*].⁴⁸

⁴⁸Rydell, "The 1939 San Francisco Golden Gate International Exposition," in *The American West*, 354.

CHAPTER 7

THE CHILDREN OF PARADISE

*The appeal of western music is sort of in our blood.
It's what this country is all about.--Emmylou Harris (1996)¹*

Introduction

In 1943 during the height of World War II, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!* gave Americans a glimpse of a postwar Paradise. Although fierce battles were raging in Europe and the Pacific, those individuals who attended productions of the musical were allowed to escape to an earlier, more optimistic time in their nation's history: the American West as represented by turn-of-the-century Oklahoma. As the curtain rose, cowboy Curly McLain entered singing

There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow,
There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow.
The corn is as high as a elephant's eye
An' it looks like it's climbin' clear up to the sky.
Oh, what a beautiful mornin'
Oh, what a beautiful day.
I got a beautiful feelin'
Ev'rythin's goin my way.²

The lovely melody and the sunshine-filled lyrics set the tone for what was to follow. The effect had been very carefully chosen by Rodgers and Hammerstein to help their audiences cleanse their memories of the nation's recent history: the Great Depression and

¹Robert K. Oermann, *American Music: The Roots of Country* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing Co., 1996), 57.

²Rodgers and Hammerstein, *6 Plays*, 7.

the Dust Bowl of the American Southwest. These were not the Okies written about by John Steinbeck, filmed by John Ford, photographed by Dorothea Lange, nor sung about by Woody Guthrie. Rather, they were cowboys of the heroic days of the American West, who could confidently sing:

We know we belong to the land,
And the land we belong to is grand!
And when we say:
Ee-ee-ow! A-yip-i-o-ee-ay
We're only sayin'
'You're doin' fine, Oklahoma!
Oklahoma, O. K.!'³

During the crisis of the Second World War, Rodgers and Hammerstein appropriated the Myth of the West to restore faith in the American Dream. At the heart of this myth was the belief in rebirth and renewal. For the nation and its citizens, the American West symbolized a place for second chances. Oklahoma, with its recent Dust Bowl image evoking the failure of that dream, was a daring choice as a setting for the musical. Rodgers and Hammerstein intended to leave their wartime and postwar audiences with an upbeat and optimistic message that would replace the negative stereotype predominant since the 1930s.

Photohistorian Deborah Bright has examined the use of the American landscape as a source of patriotism and national pride in the immediate postwar years:

Landscape books, travel guides and periodicals produced during the late 1940s and early 1950s became didactic primers for teaching American citizens (as well as

³Ibid., 76.

foreigners) about their country, their culture, and its history.⁴

Oklahoma! may be included among those “didactic primers.” According to Bright,

[They all utilized the American landscape as] a salient metaphor for the American mission of global Manifest Destiny. It would bear witness to our fitness as a nation to lead the world and show the tired, humbled, and war-torn states of Europe irrefutable evidence of our superior native gifts.⁵

Oklahoma!, which became a landmark in the history of musical theater, was able to deliver its message on a significant scale. On Broadway it played to standing-room-only audiences for five years. Numerous productions of the musical toured at home and abroad. Recordings and sheet music for the show were best sellers. In 1955 *Oklahoma!* became a very successful film starring Gordon McRae and Shirley Jones. The show continues to be popular with the American public today. An advertisement for a 1996 summer stock production described it as “the musical we all grew up with.”

In the 1940s and 1950s, Americans responded to *Oklahoma!* on a personal level. The plot told the love story of cowboy Curly McLain and farm girl Laurey Williams. Tension was added to the narrative through the character of surly and evil farmhand Jud Fry who lusts after the innocent Laurey and is ready to kill Curly so that he might have her to himself. Many of those attending 1940s productions of *Oklahoma!* were young couples who were waiting for the war to end and for the elimination of those evil forces

⁴Deborah Bright, “Victory Gardens: The Public Landscape of Postwar America,” in *Views* (Winter 1990), 4.

⁵Ibid.

that threatened their lives. Like Curly and Laurey, they wanted to begin their new lives on the postwar “frontier” that awaited them. Just as Curly had traded in his sixgun and horse to settle down as a farmer and husband, numerous GIs were anxious to exchange their M-1 rifles and khakis for briefcases and business suits. For the young couples attending performances of the musical, its view of the future looked very bright indeed. The musical’s emphasis upon a consumer-based society of abundance, symbolized by “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top,” was most appealing to their belief in a better tomorrow.

The idea of a postwar Paradise of “Beautiful Mornin’s” was on the minds of many American couples after World War II. This generation had been tempered by the economic crisis of the Great Depression and the global conflict of the Second World War. They now wanted something better, especially for their children, the so-called “baby boom” generation of the 1940s and 50s. Seen in this context, these baby boomers may be described as “The Children of Paradise.” The nature of the Paradise represented by the musical may be used as a paradigm for examining this generation and its ethos.

Singing Cowboys and Country Music

Contributing to the popularity of *Oklahoma!* throughout the 1940s and 1950s was the fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein had tapped into a rich and relevant vein of popular culture: the American Western. Significantly, this same aspect of popular culture would shape the Children of Paradise. In the early 1940s, before most of these children were born, it was already a highly popular genre disseminated on a mass scale by means of the motion picture and recording industries. At its center was the singing cowboy,

epitomized by Oklahoman Gene Autry. Autry's singing and movie career had blossomed in the 1930s when his calm, soothing voice and optimistic outlook helped Americans forget about the economic Depression that was holding back their dreams of an American Paradise.

By 1943, while Autry was serving in the military overseas, the torch had been passed to Roy Rogers who, in the same year that *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway, was described in a *Life* cover story as the "King of the Cowboys."⁶

In the character of Curly McLain, Rodgers and Hammerstein had found their own "singing cowboy" who would easily appeal to audiences already flocking to see the B Westerns of Autry, Rogers, and their countless imitators. The singing cowboy was the perfect choice for a wartime audience. As the definitive American hero, the cowboy was always ready to put an end to injustice and those evils threatening the life of the community. Like Curly McLain, Autry and Rogers were troubadours who were just as handy with a song as a sixgun, using their music to elicit a sense of optimism and harmony.

Ironically, in their borrowing of the singing cowboy motif, Rodgers and Hammerstein in turn had a major impact on the post-1943 Roy Rogers musical Westerns. Herbert Yates, the head of Republic Pictures, was so impressed by *Oklahoma!* and the characters of Curly and Laurey that, after seeing the show in New York, he hired singer Dale Evans as a female lead for Roy Rogers. Yates also enhanced the musical production

⁶H. Allen Smith, "King of the Cowboys," *Life* 15 (12 July 1943).

values of the films, frequently staging numbers that looked like scenes from the successful Broadway show.

Related to the appeal of the singing cowboy was the wartime rise in the popularity of Country and Western music in which the singing cowboy was a vital component. What had been a regional music, often derogatorily referred to as “hillbilly,” became a national music during the 1940s. The migration and movement of populations in the military and defense industries throughout the war helped to broaden the taste for this type of music. Its American and frequently patriotic flavor made it very appropriate for a nation at war.

Cowboys and Cowgirls on the Suburban Frontier

The popularity of *Oklahoma!* during the 1940s and 50s was part of a wider fascination with cowboys and the American West. The cultural forces that played a significant role in the creation and shaping of *Oklahoma!* also influenced the generation that I have described as the Children of Paradise. Cowboys and their songs are among the earliest memories of many of these children.

Country and Western folksinger Emmylou Harris was one of these Children of Paradise. Born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1947, she was part of the largest population of infants born in the United States up to that time: 1,900,000 boys and 1,800,000 girls.⁷ Harris’s childhood and youth are representative of the development and coming of age of this generation and its relationship to the Western paradigm of Paradise exemplified by a

⁷Geelynn Sumner, “The Young Man Has Gone Western,” in *Reader’s Digest* (July 1950),

musical like *Oklahoma!* In 1994 Harris described her earliest exposure to this type of popular culture and what it has meant to her over the years:

The first song I remember hearing on the radio was 'Cattle Call' by Eddy Arnold. That high-lonesome yodel came drifting out of a room in our house on 54th Street in Birmingham, Alabama--about as far away as you can get from the Western plains Mr. Arnold was singing about. I was four years old, and we had no television mornings with Roy Rogers and Lash LaRue were still in the future. I also had yet to attend my first Saturday afternoon serial at the local cinema, where high-speed shoot-outs on horseback were the standard and the good guy always wore a white hat.

Who knows, why for all these years, the plaintive sound of the cowboy--of endless stretches of openland and starry skies--has captured my imagination, never letting go, even after I discovered that right and wrong are not so easily distinguished by the color of one's Resistol. Perhaps it's just in the blood. Or maybe it's the longing for some say in one's destiny in a world that seems to conspire against us. Or, better still, perhaps it's just the simple desire to have some part of our heart remain that of a child's who doesn't yet know that you can't always reach the stars, or at the very least, ride beneath them wherever you want to go.⁸

Harris's early exposure to this example of Country and Western music was commensurate with its postwar popularity. Just as war-weary audiences had responded to Curly McLain's upbeat and optimistic "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," postwar urban and suburban Americans found solace in the belief that a Western frontier, even if only a mythic one, still existed over the horizon.

⁸Emmylou Harris, "Introduction to Brochure Notes for Emmylou Harris," in *Songs of the West* (Warner Western 45725-2, 1994).

About a year later, in 1952, the young Emmylou Harris had her photograph taken in a child's cowgirl outfit complete with hat, vest, skirt, boots, and Western-style cap gun. She is shown standing beside her family's Nash Rambler, parked in front of their suburban home in Birmingham. Emmylou's outfit is very much in keeping with her generation's fascination with cowboy clothing. The national popularity of a Western musical like *Oklahoma!* and the public's interest in colorfully dressed cowboy stars like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry led to a postwar fashion trend popularizing Western style attire. During the 1940s it had been adopted by Country singers like Alabama-born Hank Williams who wanted to shed their former hillbilly image and replace it with the more respectable image of the cowboy. In a time of rapid change, Western-style dress looked back to the country's heritage and offered Americans a national identity that they could view with pride.⁹

In the 1950s, when Emmylou was photographed as a cowgirl, this fascination with Western dress was carried over into the blossoming and ultimately very lucrative youth market. This fad for cowboy and cowgirl outfits for children coincided with the presence of Western heroes and heroines in popular culture, especially on radio, television, and at the movies. If you were a boy or girl growing up in the decade after World War II, your world was inevitably influenced by these characters. Many of the B Western cowboys had successfully made the transition from the silver screen to the then-

⁹Ted Polhemus, *Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 23-24.

new medium of television. On a typical Saturday in the early 1950s, you could find boys and girls gathered around the family television set watching the latest adventures of Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, and a host of other characters. In the mid-1950s, Walt Disney added to this pantheon through the popularization of the legendary exploits of Davy Crockett, “King of the Wild Frontier.”

The appeal of these Western characters to children like Emmylou Harris was enhanced by a consumer apparatus that targeted them as a new source of purchasing power. Each cowboy or cowgirl character was marketed and merchandised to a large and eager population of American young people. There were toys, watches, lunch boxes, records, comic books and games. A postwar child’s bedroom might be decorated with cowboy-style wallpaper, curtains, and other furnishings. Like the characters in *Oklahoma!*, these postwar children were eager consumers of the latest fads and merchandise.

As illustrated in the photograph of the five-year old Emmylou Harris, a significant part of this merchandise appeared as children’s Western-style clothing, often decorated with the name or logo of a favorite cowboy or cowgirl character. In 1950 the *Reader’s Digest* reported on this phenomenon:

Today, Junior feels that he appears in the nude unless he is togged out in broad-brimmed cowboy hat, embroidered shirt, tight blue jeans, flaming tie, decorated boots, gem-studded belt, embossed holster, shining gun, wide-spreading chaps, looped lariat and fringed gloves. And hot on his trail is Junior’s envious sister.¹⁰

¹⁰Sumner, “The Young Man Has Gone Western,” 72.

The widespread appeal of this pop culture Western gear is confirmed by the number of photographs of children taken from the 1940s through the 1950s showing them decked out in the cowboy and cowgirl costumes of their favorite Western stars. *The Saturday Evening Post*, that journalistic symbol of Rockwellian America, featured these cowboy kids on a number of its covers during the decade.

The black cowgirl outfit worn by Miss Harris was representative of the popularity of Hopalong Cassidy in the early 1950s. William Boyd, the star of the Cassidy series, pioneered in the transfer of his character to the new medium of television. His fame mushroomed as a result, and the “Hopalong Cassidy phenomenon” became the subject of cover stories in both *Life* and *Time* during 1950. The *Time* cover shows a smiling Hoppy surrounded by boys and girls dressed in his trademark black cowboy outfit. No wonder he is smiling. One million dollars of Hopalong Cassidy merchandise was sold during the first six weeks of its appearance in stores. The *Time* article focused on the cowboy’s economic power among children like Emmylou:

Among all the U. S. enterprisers who devote themselves to titillating the unripened mind, none has succeeded as Hoppy has, both with his under-age customers and the thousands of manufacturers, retailers and advertising men who hawk his wares. Last week . . . 108 licensed manufacturers were turning out Hopalong Cassidy products at the rate of \$70 million a year . . .¹¹

The *Reader's Digest* was quick to point out how the fad for juvenile Western clothing had crossed gender lines:

¹¹“Kiddies in the Corral,” in *Time* (27 November 1950), 18-19.

The rage for western clothes also extends to would-be Annie Oakleys. Many a mother is shocked to find that a little lady in the house prefers a fringed cowgirl's suit to patent leather pumps, and a toy six-shooter to a new doll . . . dozens of manufacturers are rushing production on girls' swingy, leather-like skirts, embroidered jackets, hats with tasseled chin straps, and holsters that hang low at the hips.¹²

The young Emmylou Harris was very much a part of this group, responding to the examples provided by Dale Evans and Gail Davis's Annie Oakley in the 1950s.

An American Masquerade

A psychological explanation of the appeal of Western apparel for postwar American children like Emmylou Harris was put forth by anthropologist Margaret Mead:

With fathers away from family life so much in modern times, mothers are afraid the boys will imitate them instead of their fathers, and turn into sissies: they encourage their little boys to copy the current play ideal of masculinity. Girls imitate the boys.¹³

Harris, the child of a career military officer, often found herself without a father. Indeed, during the Korean war, Walter Harris was held prisoner for almost a year by the North Koreans.

In dressing up like cowboys and cowgirls, these postwar children were also participating in the same search for a national identity represented by a musical like *Oklahoma!* Both were examples of "play" rituals where the participants were allowed to

¹²Sumner, "The Young Man Has Gone Western," 74.

¹³Oliver Jensen, "Hopalong Hits the Jackpot," *Life* (12 June 1950), 66.

take on new identities that removed them for awhile from their modern urban or suburban milieu. By “dressing the part,” these postwar children, like Emmylou Harris, absorbed a sense of their nation’s past and heritage, even if only at a mythic level. The phenomenon acted as a means of Americanization for this generation, providing children from diverse backgrounds with a common experience.

“We Taught You How to Shoot Straight”

In addition to the outward trappings of the cowboy and cowgirl that were adopted by the Children of Paradise, there was the even more important internalization of what these popular culture characters symbolized as role models for the young. Singing cowboys and cowgirls like Roy Rogers and Dale Evans or *Oklahoma!*’s Curly McLain and Laurey Williams formed part of a pantheon of postwar Western characters who looked at the world optimistically, took action against injustice and evil, and endeavored to bring about a spirit of harmony and community on the American frontier. They were the good guys who stood for a sense of fair play. Whether it was Gene Autry serenading a young schoolmarm with “You Are My Sunshine” or Curly McLain singing the praises of an Oklahoma morning, these frontier troubadours offered young people an example of the power of song to influence and persuade. Songs were an integral part of these Western morality plays and the hero’s or heroine’s guitar was just as important as their sixgun. Both could serve in the role of “peacemaker.” This was an important lesson for postwar cowboys and cowgirls like Emmylou Harris.

The Westerns that were so popular with the Children of Paradise were characterized by a collection of moral principles that Albert Tucker has described as the “Cowboy Code.” The B Western morality plays of good versus evil were carried over from the silver screen to the nascent world of television. Here their message reached an even larger audience, establishing many of the idealistic values with which the Children of Paradise grew up. These values built upon Gene Autry’s “Ten Commandments of the Cowboy” which were widely disseminated to parents and children. According to Autry’s ethical principles,

The . . . cowboy was to never take unfair advantage, always to tell the truth, be gentle, help people in distress, work hard, and show respect to women and parents. He must never possess racially intolerant ideas. Above all a cowboy had to be a patriot.¹⁴

In keeping with these views, cowboy heroes like Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers carefully guarded their public image. At the end of each Roy Rogers show, Roy turned to the camera and his youthful audience and suggested the moral lesson to be learned from the preceding twenty-nine minutes of action and adventure.

In 1974, Roy Rogers recorded “Hoppy, Gene, and Me,” his best-selling tribute to the cowboy heroes of the Children of Paradise. In this song he reminds his then 30-something audience that along with Hoppy and Gene, he had “taught you how to shoot straight,” reaffirming the ethical role this genre played in their childhood.

¹⁴Albert B. Tucker, “The ‘B’ Western and Personal Behavior,” *The Permian Historical Annual* 28 (1988): 112.

Even Cowgirls Sing the Blues: Folksongs and Social Concern

The values espoused by the singing cowboys and epitomized in Gene Autry's Cowboy Code would provide a valuable lesson for the Children of Paradise as they came of age in the 1960s. This would turn out to be a very difficult decade for those young people who had grown up believing in the American Dream of Paradise. That dream would be challenged in the 1960s by the assassination of prominent public figures, the struggle of African Americans for their civil rights, and an unpopular war in Southeast Asia. As these issues came to the fore, the Children of Paradise once again sought reassurance in their American heritage. The singing cowboys of the 1950s were now replaced by a new set of troubadours. The singers of the 1960s' folk revival, in many ways, were carrying on the message of the previous decade, although with a new found sense of urgency. Recordings of Roy Rogers' and Dale Evans' "Happy Trails" were now replaced in teenage bedrooms with the music of a new couple that captured the imagination of this generation: Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. In the early and affluent 1960s of John Kennedy's New Frontier, Dylan and his followers reinvoked images of the Depression and the Dust Bowl decade as part of a musical movement meant to bring attention to the nation's less fortunate and the discrimination that often followed them. Dylan became a disciple of Woody Guthrie and even affected an Okie accent and style of dress to add impact to his performances.

Among those responding to Bob Dylan and this new group of minstrels and their message was Emmylou Harris. In 1963 at the age of sixteen, Emmylou received her first

guitar and began singing the folksongs that were popular at this time. Harris has described her state of mind in these years:

High schools are real hip now, but there was no counterculture in Woodbridge, Va. in 1963. You were either a homecoming queen or a real weirdo. I was a 16-year old WASP wanting to quit school and become Woody Guthrie.¹⁵

In 1965, before departing to study drama at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, Harris wrote to folksinger Pete Seeger, one of her heroes. Her letter was published in *Sing Out!* the major folk music magazine of the period. In her letter she complimented Seeger for the “guts” he demonstrated in standing up for his opinions. In closing she asked:

How can I go about getting honest criticism on my singing and playing style? I am not interested in becoming a professional. But I do enjoy performing and would appreciate honest help or advice from someone who knows.¹⁶

At college Harris quickly lost interest in the study of drama and teamed up with a male classmate to sing folksongs in the style of Ian and Sylvia at local coffeehouses. By 1968 she had abandoned her educational plans and, contrary to her earlier comments in *Sing Out*, had ventured to New York City to try her luck as a performer in the Greenwich Village folk music scene. She performed alone and occasionally as part of a trio imitating the then very popular Peter, Paul and Mary. Appearing at the Bitter End and Gerdes Folk

¹⁵John T. Elson, “Angel of Country Pop,” in *Time* (16 June 1975), 83.

¹⁶Quoted in Paul Kingsbury, ed., *The Grand Ole Opry History of Country Music: 70 Years of the Songs, the Stars, and the Stories* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995), 182.

City, she became part of the circle of folksinger/songwriters that included Townes Van Zandt, Jerry Jeff Walker, Paul Siebel, and David Bromberg. Ironically, through these contacts, the Alabama-born Harris discovered the southern heritage of black country blues musicians such as Mance Lipscomb, Bukka White, Son House, and Lightning Hopkins and the social message of their music. She also became aware of the growing interest in Bluegrass music among urban folk performers.

By the late 1960s the New York folk scene was declining in strength and was about to be eclipsed by the psychedelic rock music of the 1970s. After having released an unsuccessful folk album, *Gliding Bird*, Harris left New York City and eventually became part of the still active folk, blues, and Bluegrass scene centered around Washington, D. C. It was here that Emmylou met 78-year old African American blues singer and civil rights activist Esther Mae Scott. Mother Scott, as she was known to her friends, frequently sang at demonstrations and spoke at rallies. In 1971, when she recorded her first album, Scott asked the young Harris to sing the chorus on her recording of "Black Jesus" a song that mixed theology and civil rights:

Black Jesus won't you answer some questions for me. Up
in Heaven are my people free? . . .
Is there a separate place in Heaven for angels like me?
Black Jesus, Black Jesus please tell me.
When I get to Heaven do I enter the back door?
Hang up my robe and start scrubbin' floors?
Or will I be greeted at your holy throne
so you and your angel can welcome me home.¹⁷

¹⁷Esther Mae Scott, "Black Jesus," *Mama Ain't Nobody's Fool* (PLP BOMP 1971).

Emmylou Harris had come a long way from her origins in Birmingham, Alabama, the site of much racial oppression and protest in the 1960s. In 1963 topical folksinger Phil Ochs, in his "Birmingham Jam," satirically attacked the use of fire hoses and police dogs against the city's African American population. Young folksingers like Emmylou Harris appear to have taken to heart the fifth commandment of Gene Autry's "Cowboy Code": "A cowboy does not possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas." In 1949, during the early stages of the civil rights movement, Rodgers and Hammerstein had tackled the issue of race prejudice in *South Pacific*, producing their own very powerful "folk" song "You've Got to Be Taught." The premise of the song was that racial prejudice is learned, not born in you. The Children of Paradise had been carefully taught by the values of their singing cowboy heroes to be tolerant of those who might be different. Previously, in *Oklahoma!*'s "The Farmer and the Cowman Must Be Friends," Rodgers and Hammerstein had stressed the need for cooperation among people from different backgrounds.

Conventional Wisdom

As a very successful performer and recording artist for over twenty years, Emmylou Harris has frequently returned to the roots of her youth: the traditions of the singing cowboy and the folk music scene. These are the same traditions that had enhanced the success of a musical like *Oklahoma!*

In performance and on her albums, Emmylou has often worn the costume of the cowgirl heroines of the 1950s. *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (1985), *Songs of the West* (1994),

and *Cowgirl's Prayer* (1994) all show her in this type of dress. Her musical instrument is also a tribute to that genre, for her guitar of choice has always been the Gibson Super Jumbo 200, the icon of the singing cowboy and “the romantic music of a Golden West that never was.”¹⁸

Harris has also reaffirmed her debt to these stars of her youth by appearing on several commemorations honoring the singing cowboy, such as Roy Rogers' 1991 *Tribute* album, where she joins the King of the Cowboys in singing “Little Joe the Wrangler.” In 1993 she sang “Cattle Call” and “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues” in the program *Music of the West: A Tribute to the Singing Cowboys*, sponsored by the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum.

The social concern of the folksinger has also appeared in her work. Significantly, in the context of *Oklahoma!*, several of these occasions have involved songs about the plight of the Depression era Okies. In 1973 she and her mentor Gram Parsons recorded “California Cottonfields” which tells the story of a family fleeing a rundown Oklahoma farm for the greener pastures of California only to discover the world of “labor camps filled with worried men and broken dreams.” In 1988 she honored Oklahoman Woody Guthrie (her teenage idol) by singing two of his songs, “Hobo's Lullaby” and “Deportee” on the video and album *A Vision Shared*. Then, in 1994, she participated in a tribute to Country and Western star Merle Haggard whose parents had been Dust Bowl refugees.

¹⁸Eldon Whitford, David Vinopal, and Dan Erlewine, *Gibson's Fabulous Flat-Top Guitars: An Illustrated History and Guide* (San Francisco: GPI Books, 1994), 76.

Here she sang "Mama's Hungry Eyes," another song about the experience of the Okies in California's labor camps.

In 1992 these two strands of Harris's life (and the life experiences of many of the Children of Paradise) came together in her live *At the Ryman* album which featured her new all-acoustic band, the Nash Ramblers. Two cowboy songs appear on the album: her childhood favorite "Cattle Call" and "Montana Cowgirl." These are juxtaposed with the social messages of contemporary folksongs such as Bruce Springsteen's "Mansion on the Hill" and Nanci Griffith's "It's a Hard Life Wherever You Go," a powerful musical statement condemning prejudice and intolerance. In performance and on the recording Griffith's song is paired with Richard Holler's "Abraham, Martin, and John."

In the video documenting the Ryman concert, Harris explains her interest in these socially-oriented songs:

Two of the songs in the show we're doing as a medley because I felt they were connected in theme. And the first song in the sequence is written by Nanci Griffith. It's called 'It's A Hard Life Wherever You Go.' I really can't say anything about the song except when I first heard it, it was so moving, and touched on issues about people being cruel to other people and how if we--if each individual doesn't change and learn to be kind and understanding with everyone else around them, then the world and especially the children of the world--we will have nothing really to leave them. The other song was from a very special time for me, as I think probably most other people in my generation: 'Abraham, Martin, and John' which expressed the great loss that we all felt when John Kennedy and Martin Luther King and then Bobby Kennedy were assassinated. When you look back on it, it's very easy sometimes to forget what a traumatic and emotional time that was, when you believed that the world could be a better place. That you really could make a difference and things could be changed.

I think a lot of us got afraid of those feelings because we thought, well we've been tricked. We'll never really make a difference. But I've changed my mind. I really do believe that the world can change and that people can change, but it has to come from each individual person.¹⁹

Since 1992, Harris has included "Abraham, Martin and John" in her concert tours, reminding her audience of the 1960s legacy of this song and the hopes of the decade, and her desire to see that hope renewed. Most recently, the former little cowgirl from Birmingham and the 1960s urban folksinger was asked to perform the song at the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago:

But it seems the good die young.
I just looked around and he's gone.
Didn't you love the things they stood for?
Didn't they try to find some good in you and me?
And we'll be free someday soon.
It's gonna be one day²⁰

This was an incredible moment for anyone aware of the history of the last Democratic Convention held in Chicago in 1968. That year had to be the most trying one for the Children of Paradise. Martin Luther King had been assassinated in April, followed by Robert Kennedy in June. The nation was experiencing urban riots and the war in Vietnam was dividing the country. Under orders from Mayor Richard Daley, the Chicago Police Department attacked protesters and conventioners with tear gas and nightsticks while many television viewers watched in horror and disbelief.

¹⁹Emmylou Harris at the Ryman VHS Warner Reprise Video 38258-3.

²⁰Emmylou Harris, "Abraham, Martin and John," *Democratic National Convention*, CNN Broadcast (29 August 1996).

Twenty-eight years later, with one of the Children of Paradise in the White House, another one of those Children walked out to the speaker's platform. Against the backdrop of an American flag waving in the background, she sang a song that told the story of the pain of a generation who dearly wanted to believe, along with Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, that it was a beautiful mornin' and everything was heading their way.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I have examined aspects of the postwar Paradise described by Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. Undoubtedly, the musicals' optimism made them popular with 1940s audiences and accounts for their enduring appeal. Although the world of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals was occasionally subject to the influence of evil beliefs and forces, it was essentially characterized by "beautiful mornin's" and "enchanted evenings." As Stephen Holden has suggested, the team of Rodgers and Hammerstein created "America's Happy Talk."¹ The predominantly optimistic flavor of the key songs of each musical was a result of the combination of Oscar Hammerstein's choice of upbeat lyrics and Richard Rodgers' irresistible melodies.

Oklahoma! and *South Pacific* presented a message of optimism during a difficult time: the period between World War II and the early years of the Cold War. Mankind's potential for evil and irrational acts of violence were epitomized by the mass destruction of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. Central to the optimistic philosophy inherent in the musicals was the belief in the possibility of rebirth and renewal despite the threat of evil. This belief in second chances was characteristic of the American frontier spirit that infuses the musicals. In times of crisis, the nation has often called upon this frontier ethos.

¹Stephen Holden, "Their Songs Were America's Happy Talk," *New York Times*, 24 January 1993, sec.2, p.1.

Although both musicals emphasize optimism about the nation's future, they were nevertheless cautionary tales which did not neglect some of the pitfalls of Paradise.

Rodgers and Hammerstein grappled with such issues as racism, economic rivalry, cultural imperialism, and colonialism in these musicals. According to *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, Paradise must be created by the search for community. This could be achieved only through a tolerance of difference, whether it is farmers competing with ranchers in the American West or white americans encountering Asians and other people of color along the Pacific Rim. The musicals had prophetically touched upon issues which would confront the Children of Paradise in the 1960s. This group would continue the parent generation's search for Paradise.

The original productions of *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *South Pacific* (1949) addressed a nation in search of the American Dream of Paradise in the immediate postwar world. As major works of the American musical theater in the twentieth century, however, *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific* have transcended the decade in which they were created. They continue to be performed and enthusiastically received by American audiences attending presentations which range from revivals on Broadway to regional, college, and high school productions. As long as people believe in the American Dream of second chances, there will be a place for these musicals and their message, which is at the heart of the American experience.

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