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Multiracial Democracy Today

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*“You can not build in a Democracy a nation inside a nation of two antagonistic races. The future American must be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto”*: with these words, Thomas Dixon Jr. registered the racist refrain of his 1902 novel, *The Leopard’s Spots*.<sup>1</sup> The book follows Charles Gaston, son of a dead Confederate soldier who ascends to the governorship of North Carolina and thwarts Reconstruction efforts designed to cultivate racially integrated government in the post-Civil War South. His mentor along the way is the Reverend John Durham, who imparts the book’s mendacious central message: America was made by white people, and democracy must be governed by them alone.

It is the summer of 2021, and I am reading Dixon for the first time. With my print-on-demand copy of *The Leopard’s Spots* sitting on the kitchen table, I take in the news coverage about the battles over “critical race theory” being waged at school board meetings, in state legislatures, and even in the halls of Congress.

One skirmish in this latest culture war hits close to home. A colleague at the Air Force Academy, where I teach, has just published a *Washington Post* op-ed with the title, “I’m a professor at a U.S. military academy. Here’s why I teach critical race theory.” The article strikes me as uncontroversial, but members of Congress have called for this professor’s removal.<sup>2</sup>

I turn back to Dixon’s Durham: *“You can not build in a Democracy a nation inside a nation of two antagonistic races. The future American must be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto.”* What would the concerned congressmen make of that racial theory? Or, to ask the question another way: What does 1902 have to do with 2021? And what does Dixon’s democracy have to do with ours?

This meditation—part journal entry, part essay—is my attempt at a reply.



Though today we tend to think of them as opposites, white supremacy and democracy went together in the mind of Thomas Dixon. And although Dixon certainly was one of its most egregious expositors, that idea was hardly marginal in his own time. When Doubleday, Page & Company published *The Leopard's Spots*, the North Carolina-born lawyer, author, legislator, and preacher enjoyed a national platform. The novel sold so well that one in every eight Americans could own a copy.<sup>3</sup> Members of the Black press quickly condemned the book, with one paper calling the novel “possibly the most abusive work” about the “Negro in America published up to date.”<sup>4</sup> Sutton Griggs, himself a preacher and author, penned a novel of his own that countered Dixon’s distortions, particularly images of sexually aggressive Black men threatening white women. *The Hindered Hand*, which the African American Griggs published in 1905, concludes by imagining a dead Dixon and memorializes the man who “said and did all things which he deemed necessary to leave behind him the greatest heritage of hatred the world has ever known.” “Humanity claims him not as one of her children,” declares Griggs’s epitaph.<sup>5</sup>

If his ideas weren’t still so relevant more than a century later, Dixon surely would be better left to lie in the fictional grave that Griggs dug for him decades in advance of his actual death in 1946. But with the ongoing efforts to regulate what children learn about America in public schools, and state legislation designed to make it more difficult for people of color to vote, Dixon remains a detestable but necessary figure to engage. For he recognized, even as he ruled impossible, the conditions that a thriving multiracial democracy demands.



Up until a few months ago, I had never read Thomas Dixon’s novels, despite the fact that I hold a doctorate in American literature and my research focuses on the era in which his popularity was at a high point. Once the stuff of bestsellers and school reading lists, his voluminous fictional output is not widely assigned or read (outside of avowed white supremacist circles). This is surely a good thing. In a climate where writers like Griggs, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charles W. Chesnutt, and so many other women and authors of color from the Reconstruction era are still struggling to assume their rightful place in our too narrow canon of American literature, to say nothing of popular consciousness, it makes little sense to allow Dixon any significant airtime.

Still, as I paged through *The Leopard's Spots* and the two sequels that constitute Dixon's trilogy on Reconstruction, I came to realize that Dixon's ideas were already very much present in the atmosphere, even if his name has dropped off our radar.<sup>6</sup> As I was reading the novel's profession about the impossibility of achieving a functioning democracy that is composed of more than one race, the legislature of Dixon's home state of North Carolina, where *The Leopard's Spots* is set, was ratifying House Bill 324. Just one instance of nationwide efforts to eliminate the teaching of critical thinking about race in public schools, the bill stipulates that "public school units shall not promote" that "one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex," among other concepts.<sup>7</sup>

As an astute Twitter exchange made clear, the people most likely to advance such concepts are the heirs of Thomas Dixon Jr.—modern-day white supremacists.<sup>8</sup> If it were enacted in good faith, that is, such legislation would only force the hands of someone who might want to teach—as doctrine—the arguments of *The Leopard's Spots*.

Of course, these legislative attempts have nothing to do with critical race theory, a body of scholarly knowledge that elected officials and citizens who support such moves routinely invoke as their motive. Countering a critique that has no identifiable target, as Ibram X. Kendi has written, constitutes a maddening monologue that makes democratic dialogue all but impossible.<sup>9</sup>

But that is only part of the problem. The situation grows more troubling if we consider how the anti-CRT conversation has functioned as what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has called a "metalanguage of race."<sup>10</sup> Writing in the 1990s, the African American historian used the phrase to draw attention to the reality that talking about race in America often happens by way of shorthand and euphemism, phrases whose racial referents are seemingly obscured, but in practice are all too clear (think: "correct" vs. "incorrect" English or a "good" vs. "bad" neighborhood.) Today, we might say that controversy about "Critical Race Theory" has become a metalanguage for controversies about the idea of America we want to cultivate in our systems of education and for the story of the country we want to tell in everyday conversations with fellow citizens.

Who counts as an "American"? How do we narrate an honest history, confronting both the good and the bad of a shared past, as we work to build a future?<sup>11</sup> What role should the federal government play in securing the equality of all citizens regardless of race? These were the very questions Dixon was asking—and answering, in the most limiting ways—as he wrote about the nineteenth-century effort at Reconstruction, which, for the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, "involved the very foundations of American democracy."<sup>12</sup>

To put it another way: nowhere does the name of Thomas Dixon Jr. appear in House Bill 324, which the North Carolina governor ultimately vetoed.<sup>13</sup> (Other states press on with similar efforts).<sup>14</sup> Yet the story Dixon told in *The Leopard's Spots* has hardly disappeared, even if we don't know its plot.



For a brief period, Thomas Dixon served in the very body that drafted House Bill 324. Were the author of *The Leopard's Spots* part of that debate, he might have taken special interest in the twelfth provision, which reads: "All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." North Carolina legislators wanted to *prohibit* the teaching of such a concept: "public school units shall *not* promote that all Americans are *not* created equal."<sup>15</sup> That they made the point by adopting an awkward double negative construction, rather than simply affirming the central, positive, commitment to *equality* in the Declaration of Independence, is revealing for a bill that draws on that very word to justify its actions.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, separated from the qualifier, this twelfth prohibited concept seems lifted from a chapter of Dixon's novel. En route to his rise to political power, Charles Gaston leads a movement of white men who unite against what they understand as the "domination" of Black Americans in public office. The group drafts a "second Declaration of Independence," which announces that "the government of North Carolina was established by a race of pioneer white freemen for white men and it shall remain in the hands of freemen."<sup>17</sup> Gaston and his collaborators deploy force to make this statement a reality, and thereby secure white power. Perhaps thinking of this scene, the African American paper the *Washington Bee* remarked in its September review that a chief "object" of the book was to "annihilate the Jeffersonian doctrine" articulated in the *real* Declaration.<sup>18</sup>

That was precisely what happened four years earlier, in the historical event on which Dixon drew in part for this episode, and which Charles W. Chesnut dramatized in his brilliant novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. In 1898, a group of white men in Wilmington, North Carolina, staged a violent coup that ousted the interracial government in the Black-majority city. To communicate their aims, they issued a "White Declaration of Independence." Ignoring the commitments to liberty and equality guaranteed by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, they enacted their own story of the national founding and concluded that "Anglo-Saxon" rule was at the heart of the Constitution and must be at the heart of the national future. "Our eyes are open to the fact that we must act now or leave our descendants to a fate too gloomy to be borne," they declared.<sup>19</sup>



Dixon, like the architects of the Wilmington coup, understood quite clearly that democracy requires equality. In fact, one of the simplest ways to grasp his vision of white supremacy is to say that it believes in and seeks equality—but for the white race only. As Koritha Mitchell has formulated the matter in another context, “Not White? Then you can’t be equal.”<sup>20</sup>

Startling as it may seem, that kind of thinking allowed Dixon to maintain that he was “one of” African Americans’ “best friends,” someone who wanted them to succeed—but to recognize they could never do so in the United States.<sup>21</sup> (The comment prompted one Black writer to wish that “some Negro gathering could show” Dixon “how his friendship . . . is appreciated by giving him a good coating of tar and feathers.”)<sup>22</sup>

It was also this thinking that motivated one of the type-scenes of Thomas Dixon’s fiction, the idea that progress for Black Americans necessarily meant regress for white Americans. “You have suffered,” declares Tim Shelby, one of Dixon’s Black characters in *The Leopard’s Spots*. “Now let the white man suffer.” “If white men want to live in the South they can become our servants,” Shelby announces to a group of African American listeners at a political meeting.<sup>23</sup>

The speech, I’ve discovered, was not Dixon’s invention. The lines were spoken by Henry Black, a Norfolk, Virginia, freedman who in October 1867 joined with other African American residents to resist removal when the land on which they had been building a life was returned to the Confederate William Taylor.<sup>24</sup> It was the local paper, the racist and anti-Republican *Norfolk Virginian*, that first reported on the episode. When newspapers from New York City to San Francisco drew on this coverage, they ran it under headlines warning of the dangers of “Negro ascendancy” and “supremacy,” and marshaled it as proof that an “inferior race,” incapable of self-government, was being controlled by “unprincipled white demagogues.”<sup>25</sup>

This reporting probably stood as Dixon’s source: the scene in *The Leopard’s Spots* is nearly a word-for-word transcription of the newspaper coverage of Black’s 1867 speech. Dixon, like the reporters for these white-run papers, could only tell one story about the events in Norfolk. A reversal of the conditions of racial subjugation—where Black Americans now force white Americans to labor for them—was the only way that Dixon could fathom equality of the races. The notion that racial progress is a zero-sum game stands as Dixon’s most abiding and insidious legacies.<sup>26</sup>

But there is, I think, another story to be told about this scene. That story exists amid newspaper articles and government documents, reports by Freedmen’s Bureau agents and letters penned by Norfolk African Americans. These

are the layers that compose the historical record of what really happened in the Norfolk, Virginia, in 1867: a history that came down to us through Thomas Dixon's fiction—his lies about Reconstruction that became the truth.

Who was Henry Black, the man behind Dixon's Tim Shelby? When Black spoke to the freedpeople of Taylor Farm on that fall day in 1867, what did he want them to see? His speech made clear the revolution in the social order that would be necessary for the formerly enslaved to become genuinely *free* people, even if he didn't literally mean that white people should serve African Americans. And even if he did, who could blame him for hoping that another reversal of fortune might keep his community on the land they deemed was their own, and for organizing to make that hope material?

I will try to find out, if I can. Doing so will require me to engage more with Thomas Dixon and the white supremacist ideology that animated his thinking and much of the historiography of Reconstruction of which Dixon's writing was part and parcel.

Strangely, this is unfamiliar terrain for me. I'm used to writing about Sutton Griggs and his African American contemporaries, the authors who sought to contest—directly and actively in Grigg's case—Dixon's story. But writing about white writers like Dixon, as a white scholar myself, feels different. "White American literature . . . is arguably the most prominent and most problematic of the traditions that involve race" in American literary history, claims John Ernest. And for that reason, "it cannot be ignored in favor of more focused and more ultimately uplifting stories."<sup>27</sup>

I take this message as if addressed directly to me.



I want to distance myself from Dixon's extremism, but it's better to be honest about the traction his story about the possibility of racial equality in a democracy holds. Americans, especially white Americans, must work to reject his conclusions. At the same time, we must frame the stakes of our ongoing discussions about white supremacy, anti-racism, and CRT in the terms that Dixon deployed; only by formulating a language that links equality and democracy can we construe the full significance of the arguments and understand *why* talking about them really matters.<sup>28</sup> As the political theorist Danielle Allen has put it, "The simple fact of the matter is that the world has never built a multiethnic democracy in which no particular ethnic group is in the majority and where political equality, social equality and economics that empower all have been achieved."<sup>29</sup>

The novels of Thomas Dixon testify to the truth of that statement. As we engage in the novel project of making America a multiracial democracy in a moment that some have called a "Third Reconstruction," may Dixon's

writings also show us the thinking to avoid if we want both his name—and the notions they promote—to truly disappear from the story of America.

—U. S. Air Force Academy

## Notes

1. Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden—1865–1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1902), 383. Newberry Library General Collections, Y255.D645.

2. Jeff Zeman, "Pentagon resists Congressional pressure to remove Air Force Academy professor for teaching critical race theory," *FIRE.com*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.thefire.org/pentagon-resists-congressional-pressure-to-remove-air-force-academy-professor-for-teaching-critical-race-theory/>.

3. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 158.

4. *Cleveland Gazette*, February 28, 1903, p. 3.

5. Sutton E. Griggs, *The Hindered Hand; Or, The Reign of the Repressionist* (1905), ed. John Cullen Gruesser and Hanna Wallinger (Morgantown: West Virginia Univ. Press, 2017), 224.

6. See Brook Thomas, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2017) and Gordon Fraser, "The End of Reconstruction, Again: Dylann Roof, Thomas Dixon Jr., and the Transhistorical Structures of Racist Feeling," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 6 (Spring 2018), 174–81.

7. House Bill 324, Ratified Bill, General Assembly of North Carolina, Session 2021, <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2021/Bills/House/PDF/H324v6.pdf>, p. 1.

8. Aaron Hanlon, Brigitte Fielder, and Jeffrey Insko, July 9, 2021, <https://twitter.com/JeffreyInsko/status/1413496453469655046>.

9. Ibram X. Kendi, "There Is No Debate Over Critical Race Theory," *Atlantic Monthly*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/opponents-critical-race-theory-are-arguing-themselves/619391/>.

10. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Meta-language of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17 (Winter 1992), 251–74.

11. This question is one of the many taken up in *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century*, Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, June 2020, [https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic-Citizenship\\_Our-Common-Purpose\\_o.pdf](https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic-Citizenship_Our-Common-Purpose_o.pdf).

12. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935), p. 708. See also Eric Foner, "Lessons Not Yet Learned: How Post-Civil War Reconstruction Never Ended," September 17, 2021, *Literary Hub*, <https://lithub.com/lessons-not-yet-learned-how-post-civil-war-reconstruction-never-ended/>.

13. "Governor Cooper Signs Nine Bills into Law, Vetoes Two Bills," <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2021/09/10/governor-cooper-signs-nine-bills-law-vetoes-two-bills>.

14. Reagan Rude, "Ohio's critical race theory bills: What they are, and how they could affect Miami," *The Miami Student* (Oxford, OH), September 20, 2021, <https://www.miamistudent.net/article/2021/09/ohio-education-bills>.

15. House Bill 324, p. 2, p. 1.



16. See Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: Liveright, 2014).

17. Dixon, *Leopard's Spots*, 412, 411, 412.

18. *Washington Bee*, September 13, 1902, p. 4.

19. "The White Declaration of Independence" (1898), W. T. Schmid, *What Happened in 1898?: The White Supremacist Revolution in Wilmington, North Carolina*, <http://people.uncw.edu/schmidt/Misc/1898/1898WhiteDec.html>.

20. See Appendix B to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted*, ed. Koritha Mitchell (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2018), quote on 267.

21. Thomas Dixon Jr., "Booker T. Washington and The Negro," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 19, 1905, in Griggs, *The Hindered Hand*, ed. Gruesser and Wallinger, 267.

22. Chas. D. Clem, "Launching of a New Enterprise: A Scathing Rebuke Given to Thomas Dixon for his vile Utterances relative to the Negro," *Vindicator*, September 1, 1905, p. 1.

23. Dixon, *Leopard's Spots*, 91.

24. I explore this episode at greater length in my book manuscript-in-progress, "Reconstructing Revenge: Stories of Race and Justice from America's Long Civil War." On the 1867 Norfolk, Virginia, episode, see also Ana Carmin Rosado, "The Ties That Bind Us to Earth: Neighborhoods and Interpersonal Relationships of Black Southern Marylanders, 1850–1910," PhD diss. (Northwestern University, 2021).

25. "The Negro Difficulties in Norfolk County, Va.," *New York Times*, October 13, 1867, p. 1; "The Consequences of Negro Ascendancy in the South," *New York Herald*, October 18, 1867, p. 6; "What The Negroes Demand—Not Equality But Supremacy," *Edgefield Advertiser*, November 6, 1867, p. 2; "The Consequences of Negro Ascendancy in the South," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 16, 1867, p. 1.

26. See Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021).

27. John Ernest, introduction to *Race in American Literature and Culture*, ed. John Ernest (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2022), 4. See also Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001).

28. "Diversity without democracy has no moral compass," asserts a prescient Association of American Colleges and Universities study first published in 1995 and reissued in a second edition in 2011; see *The Drama of Diversity and Democracy: Higher Education and American Commitments* (Washington, DC: AACU, 1995; 2011). See also Jason England and Richard Purcell, "Higher Ed's Toothless Response to the Killing of George Floyd," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/higher-ed-toothless-response-to-the-killing-of-george-floyd>.

29. Danielle Allen, "Charlottesville is not the continuation of an old fight. It is something new," *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charlottesville-is-not-the-continuation-of-an-old-fight-it-is-something-new/2017/08/13/971812f6-8029-11e7-b359-15a3617c767b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charlottesville-is-not-the-continuation-of-an-old-fight-it-is-something-new/2017/08/13/971812f6-8029-11e7-b359-15a3617c767b_story.html).