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LYNN RIGGS: FORGOTTEN GENIUS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

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Major Director: Noreen C. Barnes
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Lynn Riggs was an early to mid-20th century Native American playwright who wrote twenty-four full length plays, his sole enduring success being *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the play upon which the musical *Oklahoma!* is based. For much of the early part of Riggs's career, he was considered a uniquely pioneering and promising playwright, cited in competition with Eugene O'Neill as vying for the position of best playwright of their age. But while O'Neill has gone on to be considered America's Greatest Playwright, the life and works of Lynn Riggs, save for his contribution to Rodgers and Hammerstein, have gone largely forgotten and unexamined. It is the purpose of my paper to 1) provide a biographical sketch of the man, 2) give an overview of several major themes that run through his work, and 3) provide some theory and analysis as to why the promise of this young and distinctly Native American voice was never adequately fulfilled in his lifetime. I will attempt to argue that a combination of circumstances including Riggs's poor home life, his at times misogynistic and racist points of view, America's inability to see Native Americans as other than caricatures and, quite simply, bad luck put much of Riggs's writing on a fast track to failure and contemporary obscurity.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BIOGRAPHY

“There is a winged lightness in the words that the poet puts in the mouths of his young people, an ecstasy born of the sheer joy of being alive.” –Barrett H. Clark from the forward of *Big Lake*, August 1927

“This script – you know it is twash.” – Marlene Dietrich from the foreword of *The Cherokee Night*

Rollie Lynn Riggs was the author of twenty-four plays (twenty-two full length and two one-acts), several volumes of poetry, short stories, an unfinished novel, and multiple movie scripts. Yet today he is known best not for his own work, but for the contribution of source material from his *Green Grow the Lilacs* to the first Rodgers and Hammerstein musical smash collaboration: *Oklahoma!*, a musical that removed much of what Riggs would have considered his best effort: his folk songs, his multicultural characters, and the simplicity of his narrative, and replaced them with big Broadway showstoppers, stock characters and a “whites only” open range.

What happened to the legacy of Lynn Riggs that he barely ranks a footnote in the annals of American Theatre history? How is it that this uniquely poetic Southwestern voice that many called fresh, promising, and the rival of Eugene O’Neill in the late 1920s went practically unnoticed when he died in 1954 from complications of stomach cancer? To answer this question I began by reading all plays of Riggs’s still either published or obtainable through loan or purchase. Five plays out of a total of thirteen published: *Green Grow Grow the Lilacs*, *Big Lake*, *Hang Onto Love*, *Russet Mantle* and *The Cherokee Night*, remain in print for purchase or licensing, though *Green Grow the Lilacs* is Riggs’s only play to receive regular contemporary performances. Another nine proved available through Amazon and inter-library loans. In total I was able to examine fourteen out of seventeen of Riggs’s published works, about sixty percent of his total dramatic canon, but better than eighty percent of his published material.

My examination of his life and works is divided into three parts. Assuming the reader knows little about either his life or his plays, Chapter One is a biography of the playwright drawn mainly but not exclusively from three sources: two unpublished doctoral dissertations, one from 1957 and the other from 1959, and on Phyllis Cole Braunlich's *Haunted By Home: The Life and Letters of Lynn Riggs*, published in 1988. I will spotlight in this section the pinnacle of Riggs's career with two subsections on *Green Grow the Lilacs* and its reinvention as the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical smash, *Oklahoma!*

Chapter Two will be a textual examination of commonalities and themes found in Riggs's work divided into four major categories: Views on Women, Views on Men, Views on Minorities, and Views on Sovereignty vs. Statehood. In each category, drawing from the fourteen examined plays, I will attempt to assess the personal views of the playwright with respect to the aforementioned categories.

Chapter Three will conclude with my personal speculations as to why his career has gone largely and for the most part undeservedly unexplored and un-lauded. It is my sincerest hope that through my personal speculation on and examination of this man and his work that others will come to discover his plays, seek to restore him a place in the regular dramatic canon of performance, and in general raise renewed interest in the life and legacy of this forgotten genius.

BIOGRAPHY¹

Rollie Lynn Riggs was born August 31, 1899 on a farm three miles southwest of Claremore, Oklahoma, Indian Territory, on the Collinsville road. His mother, Rose Ella Duncan, who was either 1/8 or 1/16 Cherokee and a member of the Bird Clan², bore two previous children: Mattie, age four, and Edgar, age two. His father, William Grant Riggs, was a practical and materialistic rancher. Ella died in November 1901 when Lynn was two years old. The following June, William remarried to Juliette Chambers, a graduate of the Female Seminary at Tahlequah. Despite being a good cook and housekeeper, Juliette was a cold and unsympathetic stepmother and is represented fictionally in a negative light in at least three of Lynn's plays³.

When Lynn was six, Juliette convinced William to move the family into town. William bought stock in and eventually rose to the presidency of the Farmer's Bank and Trust Co. of Claremore. After the death of Ella, he had shown little interest in the rearing of the children, least of all Lynn, who was considered by his father "soft" in nature. Lynn gradually grew to hate him. Juliette, though a dutiful mother, appears to have been of the same mind. As a result the children were frequently given over to the custody of their father's sister, their Aunt Mary Riggs Brice, the proprietor of a boarding house in Claremore. Aunt Mary was truly beloved by Lynn, and she and his sister Mattie came to provide the mothering affection that Ella could not and Juliette chose not to. Lynn later immortalized both Aunt Mary and Mattie as "Aunt Eller" and "Laurey" of *Green Grow the Lilacs* and then *Oklahoma!* fame (Erhard 17).

In 1912, at the age of thirteen, Lynn was enrolled at the Eastern University Preparatory School in Claremore. During this time he sang in the local movie house owned by his voice

¹ All biographical information was taken from either Charles Aughtry's "Lynn Riggs, Dramatist: A Critical Biography" or Eloise Wilson's "Lynn Riggs: Oklahoma Dramatist" and condensed unless otherwise noted.

² Aughtry says she was 1/8 Cherokee on pg 8, Wilson says she was 1/16 on pg 1.

³ Wilson lists *The Lonesome West*, *Some Sweet Day*, and *The Cream in the Well* as primary examples.

teacher. Many of the folk songs Lynn was exposed to later found their way into his work as a playwright, most significantly in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. He graduated in 1917 with no immediate plans for college; his father saw no value in higher education, and Lynn himself was more interested in becoming an actor than a scholar. At eighteen he hopped a cattle train bound for Chicago and worked for a short while in the claims department of the Adams Express Co. He soon moved to New York where he held various jobs reading proof for the Wall Street Journal, sweeping out Wall Street offices, performing as an extra on movies in the Bronx and Astoria, and working as a clerk in Macy's bookstore. However, by 1919, suffering from ill health, Lynn was forced to return to Oklahoma to recuperate.

Despite reporting for a time in Tulsa for the *Oil and Gas Journal*, Lynn still had no intention of settling in his home state. In 1920, he moved to Los Angeles where he once again both read proof, this time for the *Los Angeles Times*, and worked as a movie extra. During this short stay, the *Times* published Lynn's poem 'Spasm,' "named, in jest, by the editor" (Aughtry 10). Despite this small measure of literary success, Lynn once again returned to his home state, this time enrolling (against his father's wishes) in the University of Oklahoma at Norman that September.

A member of the class of 1924, Lynn attended only six regular semesters plus one summer, withdrawing at the beginning of his senior year due to "a deeply rooted case of pulmonary tuberculosis" (Aughtry 19). He never went back. However, during his time in school he did teach composition during his sophomore year, was a teaching fellow in English during his junior year, wrote his first premiered play, *The Cuckoo*, and gained the attention of literary editor H.L. Mencken for his contributions of poems and essays to the school literary magazines. He also fell in love with a Miss Eileen Yost who eventually broke his heart. She chose to marry the

heir of a Wisconsin beer baron and later died in childbirth. Lynn told his sister many years later that Eileen had been the one love of his life.

In 1924, Lynn moved semi-permanently to Santa Fe, New Mexico, for his health. Tending chickens on Witter Bynner's ranch and eventually working for the Spanish and Indian Trading Co., Lynn was to find a new muse, mentor, and mother-figure in Ida Rauh Eastman. Rauh, one of the founders of the Provincetown Players, on a dare, convinced Lynn to write and direct his first serious play, *Knives from Syria*. *Knives*, more a serio-comedy than outright drama, concerns a young girl's desire to leave her mother, thus breaking free from the monotony of Oklahoma prairie life. She outwits the matron into consenting to a marriage with a travelling Syrian peddler certain to take her away from their farm. The play, premiered by the Santa Fe Players in 1925, was a success for Lynn, culminating in its publication in 1927 by Samuel French Inc. in *One-Act Plays for Stage and Study, Third Series*, his first published play.

Rauh spurred Lynn on to writing full-length material. He responded by writing *The Primitives* (which he destroyed), *Sump'n Like Wings*, *A Lantern to See By*, and *Big Lake* (a true full-length play), all composed in 1925 and early 1926. Both *Lantern* and *Sump'n* were published and dedicated to Ida as "two Oklahoma plays." *Big Lake* garnered Lynn a New York premiere on April, 8 1927 by the American Laboratory Theatre with Richard Boleslavsky directing. *Big Lake*, though it received mixed reviews by several leading New York critics, also found advocacy for Lynn's work in the form of Walter Winchell, Burns Mantle, and Barrett Clark. Clark would later write the forward for *Big Lake*, calling Lynn not only a new voice in the theatre but a new kind of theatrical voice: a poetic one (*Big Lake* viii). This moniker stuck and would be used to define Lynn's work for most of the remainder of his career.

Numerous plays followed: *Reckless*, 1927, later re-developed and expanded as *Roadside*; *The Lonesome West*, 1927, a semi-autobiographical and harsh account of Riggs' home life with Juliette; and *Rancor*, 1927, first produced in 1928 by the Hedgerow Theatre in Rose Valley, PA just outside of Philadelphia. Over the entire course of Lynn's career, Hedgerow was to premiere or produce many of his subsequent works.

Relocating once again to New York, Lynn followed *Rancor* with *The Domino Parlor*, later rewritten and published as *Hang On To Love*. *The Domino Parlor* opened in Newark, NJ on June 18, 1928 with Mrs. Lionel Barrymore, Irene Fenwick, in the lead. Despite her husband Lionel's praise that it was "...the best play I've read in twenty years" (Aughtry 29), *Hang On* ran but one week and failed to secure a New York premiere. The Schuberts, having initially backed the play, demanded script revisions before a Broadway premiere. Lynn refused, citing artistic integrity, and the producers let the commodity die. This was to be a perennial problem in Lynn's dealings with New York money and certainly one of the contributing factors to his eventual decline as a sought-after playwright.

In the spring of 1928, Lynn was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Scholarship, the first Oklahoman to be so honored. In July he sailed to France and wrote a one-act, *On a Siding* (destroyed by him), and began work on *Green Grow the Lilacs*. He also continued work on another play begun in Saratoga Springs, *Roadside*. *Roadside* opened in New York in September 26, 1930 and, though praised by critic Arthur Hopkins as "the first American dramatic classic," it ran a dismal eleven performances (Erhard 13). *Lilacs* was produced by the Theatre Guild, opening in New York on January 26, 1931 and shortly thereafter received a Pulitzer nomination. Though he could not have known it at the time, with the sole exception of

its later incarnation, *Oklahoma!*, *Lilacs*' premiere and adulation was to be the high water mark of Lynn's career. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

By 1930, Lynn had proven successful enough to own homes in New York, Santa Fe, and Hollywood. In this same year he wrote the screenplay for *Beyond Victory* and began work on his most ambitious and arguably most experimental play, *The Cherokee Night*, a seven scene non-sequential opus illustrating the demise of the Cherokee people at the hands of white encroachment. By that fall, Doubleday had agreed to publish a collection of his poetry, *The Iron Dish*. In 1931, Lynn completed work on *The Sons of Perdition*, produced by Hedgerow to poor reviews in 1933, and *The Cherokee Night* again produced by Hedgerow the year before, also to mixed reception. This period of his career also saw the creation of *More Sky*, 1934, Lynn's attempt to write a Greek tragedy-like piece, this one retelling Plato's Fall of Atlantis; *Russet Mantle*, 1936, a preachy and marginally humorous Santa Fe-based comedy of modern life; and *A World Elsewhere*, 1936-1937, a play that exists in both one-act and full-length versions that Lynn continued to tinker with until 1947, when it was included for publication in *Four Plays* with *The Year of Pilár*, *Dark Encounter*, and *The Cream in the Well*. None of the above-listed plays matched the success of Lynn's earlier work.

Though Lynn continued to write throughout the 1940s both for stage and screen, his output lessened and became less enamored of by the critics. This was most evident after the 1941 premiere of *The Cream in the Well*, Lynn's caustic morality play on the evils of incest. None of the New York critics endorsed it, some dismissing it out of hand as vulgar and poisonous. It ran a mere twenty-four performances and proved to be his last new play to see Broadway. *Oklahoma!*, premiering on March 31, 1943—a reworking of *Green Grow the Lilacs*—would be the closest Lynn's work would come to achieving renewed interest, but Rodgers' music and Hammerstein's

lyrics and book revisions overshadowed Lynn's contributions. Though *Oklahoma!* made Lynn fiscally solvent for the rest of his life—he received \$250/week in royalties—he remained largely a frustrated and progressively embittered has-been (Pliyright 25).

Lynn continued to write both plays and poems till shortly before his death. Included in this last period were the plays *Verdigris Primitive*, *Tragic Ground*, *Laughter from a Cloud*, *Out of Dust*, and *Some Sweet Day*. He collected another volume of poems under the title, *Hamlet Not the Only*, but failed to find a publisher. He wrote an autobiographical television play entitled *Someone to Remember* and was working on a novel, *The Affair at Easter*, left incomplete upon his death. In December of 1953 Lynn experienced a stomach hemorrhage while at his home on Shelter Island, off Long Island. This culminated in a brief hospital stay but little was made of it by him at the time. The following spring Lynn was hospitalized again, this time for one month, from May 30, 1954 till June 30, 1954 when he ultimately succumbed to stomach cancer. His sister Mattie, summoned from Oklahoma, was by his side for much of his last time alive. The *New York Times* carried a brief obituary of his passing, but aside from that, his death went largely unnoticed by the Broadway intelligentsia.

However, back in Oklahoma, although he had received little encouragement or attention from his home state while alive, his fellow Sooners were ready to preserve his name for posterity. His body was removed to Claremore where it was to lay in state under the Oklahoma state flag till July 6, 1954—the first person to ever receive this honor—when it was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Claremore (Anonymous 31). A Lynn Riggs Memorial was dedicated on June 8, 1956 with the assistance of Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Lynn's letters and papers were concurrently assembled in Claremore's Will Rogers Library. Lynn Riggs had at last made his peace with the Indian Territory and its denizens that had been the subject of both inspiration

and haunted devastation for so much of his work; and they in turn would honor his artistic contribution by making him a tourist attraction.

GREEN GROW THE LILACS

Green Grow the Lilacs, written while Lynn was in France on a Guggenheim Foundation scholarship, was started in the Café Les Deux Magots on the Left Bank in Paris and completed five months later in Cagnes-sur-Mer, in Southern France. The Theatre Guild signed a contract to produce the play on October 1, 1929; however, due to casting scheduling it did not actually debut until January 26, 1931 (Braunlich 86). Originally titled *Shivaree* [sic], Lynn later changed the title in annoyance after Samuel French, his literary agency, insisted that he provide evidence that such customs had ever existed on the prairie. The shivoree was a marriage custom enacted upon the bride and groom on their wedding night with similarities to a marital hazing. By the time Lynn wrote the play, shivorees had devolved and softened to the tying of cans to car bumpers and the throwing of rice, so his New York contemporaries had difficulty believing that prairie wedding nights could ever have been so rudely and roughly interrupted. In *Green Grow*, Curly and Laurey, on their wedding night, are ousted from their home to the clanging of pots and pans by friends and relations. Straw dolls of potential future children are tossed to them as good omens. Coming upon the scene, the antagonist Jeeter Fry, lusting for Laurey, gets drunk and sets fire to a haystack the bride and groom have been foisted upon. After a scuffle with Curly, Jeeter falls upon his own knife and dies. The play ends with Curly, knowing he will have to answer to charges of murder in the morning, going off to bed to consummate his marriage. It is a happy if bittersweet and unfinished ending since justice is uncertain, however likely.

The plot itself could easily be (and was) classified as cliché and melodramatic. However, in this instance Lynn had interwoven folk songs from his youth into the fabric of the play via an onstage entourage of singing cowboys creating what some thought was a unique form of entertainment: the “folk drama.” In a stroke of casting genius, the producers hired real cowboys

from a rodeo that had just closed at Madison Square Garden, adding authenticity to the proceedings (Braunlich 101). These cowboys managed to sing eleven of Lynn's collected folk songs, either from within the play or in front of the curtain during scene changes. The innovation gave the plot scope and a poetic, metaphoric quality that would not have existed in a "straight" play. Most reviewers—with the notable exception of Brooks Atkinson (though he later back-pedaled his criticism after Lynn's death)—responded favorably to the poetic "folk drama." Charles Darnton of *Evening World* wrote, "Lynn Riggs catches the spirit of the people in the Indian Territory of 1900, when it was turning from cattle into farming country. This he has done with the sympathy of the poet rather than the power of a dramatist" Robert Littell wrote in *Morning World*, "It is one of the most thoroughly satisfying evenings that the Guild has given us in a long time" John Mason Brown wrote in the *New York Evening Post*, "It has a racy vigor that is undeniable and a swing to many of its finely cadenced lines which indicates that it is a poet who has fashioned them" (Braunlich, 97-98).

News of the play's success and critical praise was so widespread that it even managed to reach Lynn's native state where, in mid-1931, an article in the University of Oklahoma's *Sooner* magazine reported that *Green Grow the Lilacs* was one of eight plays under consideration for the Pulitzer Prize (Braunlich 103). But as seems to have been the case all too frequently in Lynn's life, though the praise was there the prize went to someone else. When the winner was finally announced, it was Susan Glaspell who was awarded the Pulitzer for *Alison's House*. Up until that moment, *Alison's House*—a thinly disguised reworking of Emily Dickinson's biography, with characters and settings changed due to the Dickinson's estate's denial of permission—was not considered a serious contender. Lynn, in the press, magnanimously congratulated Susan, whom he genuinely knew and liked, but he was secretly disappointed and seriously crushed. It

was to be the only time in his life that his work ever came under such favorable critical scrutiny. And while his play was soon to be reincarnated into the WWII era's first mega-musical, *Alison's House* re-opened following the awarding of the prize, struggled to find an audience through a limited two-week run, and quickly closed, relatively forgotten.

OKLAHOMA!

In 1942, with \$30,000 to its name, the struggling Theatre Guild decided somewhat grudgingly to resurrect its most notable success of the last decade, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, only this time as a full-blown musical (Braunlich 177). As luck would have it Oscar Hammerstein II had been considering much the same thing for his first lyrical partnering with composer, Richard Rodgers, so bargains were struck and the project was initiated. Individual backers were sought out to invest \$1,500 each. With dim prospects projected in the press for the “cowboy” show various critics famously quipped, “You can’t kill people in a musical,” and “No legs, no jokes - no chance!” (Braunlich 178) Despite the air of negativity, the production team assembled and soldiered on. What followed is widely and famously documented. *Oklahoma!* went on to play 2,248 performances over a five year and nine month stay on Broadway, the longest run of its day until it was surpassed by *My Fair Lady*. It resurrected the careers of both Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, made stars of Alfred Drake, Howard da Silva, and Celeste Holm, solidified the “Dream Ballet” as a staple of American musical theatre for a time, and opened doors for choreographer turned director Agnes De Mille. It was the first time the entire score of a Broadway musical was issued on records. The movie, released in 1955, grossed over \$8 million. And the contributors who originally invested \$1500 were rewarded with returns of up to \$50,000 per person (Braunlich 178). Despite all of this hoopla, and despite persistent deference by R and H to Lynn’s “ur-contribution” to the success of the musical, what *Oklahoma!* failed to do was truly resurrect the flagging career of Lynn Riggs.

Oklahoma! both is and is not *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The basic story of course is the same, but thereafter the changes are significant. Oscar, not Lynn, is credited with writing the libretto despite a credible argument (Hammerstein’s in fact) that over half the dialogue is

actually Lynn's own. Gone was Lynn's six scene, parallel poetic structure of *Green Grow*. Where he had labeled the first three scenes as Character and the last three as Story was now a two-act standard play format. Also gone—to make room for Rodgers' music—were the folk songs that Lynn had lovingly and painstakingly collected from his childhood. The characters “Ado Annie” and “The Peddler” were expanded for comic effect. She was further given a love interest, “Will Parker,” and an overbearing father. “Old Man Peck” was replaced with “Ike Skidmore,” the play party was replaced with a box social, and “Jeeter” was renamed “Jud.” Also significantly absent from the update was the ambiguity of “Curly's” sentence. Hammerstein, perhaps sensing his audience's need for a happy resolution penned a mock populist trial at the scene of the crime in which all present exonerate him from “Jud's” death. And, perhaps most telling of the times, all the characters which heretofore were of mixed or Native American descent were now white and unflaggingly patriotic.

Regardless of the changes, Lynn remained magnanimous in the press. However, privately he expressed regret over the loss of his precious folk songs and confided to Ida Rauh Eastman that he “preferred the simplicity of his own more authentic rendering of Oklahoma life” (Braunlich 182). In a short-sighted and some would say bitter irony, the Pulitzer Prize board of 1944 chose to convey a special citation on the work of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Lynn's contribution was not recognized in the awarding of this prize. Despite numerous public efforts by both Rodgers and Hammerstein to recognize Lynn's significance to the project, often going so far as to say self-effacingly that the lyrics were often contained within Lynn's stage directions, they just needed to be lifted out (which indeed was true), the world's attention was focused on Dick and Oscar. This prompted critic Richard Watts, Jr. of the *New York Herald-Tribune* to write at one point, “There has been a surprising minimum of applause bestowed upon

Lynn Riggs, who wrote *Green Grow the Lilacs* and who seems to be the forgotten man of the musical show based upon it” (Braunlich 184). But no one was listening.

CHAPTER TWO: TEXTUAL EXAMINATION

In this section I have attempted to extrapolate Riggs's personal views from the repeated patterns inherent in his primary subject matter: plots, characters, and outcomes. His handling of Women, Men, Minorities and matters of Sovereignty across his plays reveals idiosyncrasies unique to his writing that are likely the result of the personal opinions and experiences of the playwright.

VIEWS ON WOMEN

“But they’s women and women. And some of ‘em is accordin’ to rules, and some of ‘em never heared no rules to be accordin’ to.” - Curly, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (page 16)

There are no happy endings for women in the works of Lynn Riggs. That is to say, at the very least, that those women for whom there is a happy ending do not have one in the conventional sense that the court of Riggs’s contemporary opinion would support; and for many others their ending is tragic or at the very least mixed with sorrow, bitterness or loss. Toni Devereau in *Hang Onto Love* and Rose Dunham in *Out of Dust* become murderers. Hannie Rader in *Roadside* manipulates her husband into adultery to win a divorce only to take up with a criminal. Annie Marble in *A Lantern to See By* allows herself to be a kept woman by the widower John Harmon in order to save enough money to get to Muskogee where she has been offered a position in the local whorehouse. Kay Rowley in *Russet Mantle* and Willie Baker in *Sump’n Like Wings* both are impregnated by men that cannot or will not support them. Betty in *Big Lake* and Julie Sawters in *The Cream in the Well* drown themselves. And Pilár Crespo in *The Year of Pilár* immolates herself. With the sole exception of Laurey Williams in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, no woman in Riggs’s published canon can claim a conventionally positive ending to her story, and even Laurey’s story is not brought to a definitive close by Riggs. For unlike *Oklahoma!*, Riggs chooses to end *Lilacs* the night before Curly’s trial where it is assumed that Curly will be acquitted of Jeeter’s murder, but this is pure mob speculation. In the eyes of an impartial law, Curly and Jeeter were rivals for Laurey’s hand, with Jeeter losing both his job and the object of his lust upon Laurey’s accepting of Curly’s advances. This alone would be enough to establish “just cause” for murder: a jealous lover’s quarrel that escalated into violence after threats were made. Furthermore, Curly has broken out of prison (without considering the extenuating consequences) to consummate his marriage the night before the trial. And thirdly,

the murder took place at a “shivoree,” a local, raunchy wedding night custom that is discouraged by the federal authorities for inciting men to excessive mischief. Laurey is moments from consummating her marriage as the curtain falls, but the “morning after” is far from a certain one of wedded bliss.

A close second in the “happy endings” race would be Rhodie Buster of *Knives from Syria*, ironically Riggs’s first published play and the one with the most similarities to *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Indeed, Rhodie could be Laurey if Laurey yearned for something other than farm life, and Martha Buster and the Syrian Peddler are almost certainly prototypes of the later, more fully developed characterizations of Aunt Eller Murphy and Ali Hakim. But where Laurey is looking for a man close to home, Rhodie is looking for a man, any man, who will take her away from her present life. Her desire is so great that in the end she, against the strenuous objections of her entrapped mother Martha, accepts the proposal of a Syrian Peddler who promises to take her away to see the world, despite the fact that so little is known about him that he does not even warrant the courtesy of a proper name in the script. Leaving her home for the last time, Rhodie defiantly spits at her mother, “I won’t even think of you. We won’t never come back!” (*Knives from Syria* 207) Despite the immediate accomplishment of Rhodie’s desires, one must wonder what real chances of happiness this couple can hope to accomplish, what the true character of The Syrian Peddler even is, and whether or not the couple’s long distance infatuation can morph into a long-lasting bond of genuine affection. Again, Riggs never gives us an indication of the next moment, but it is hard to imagine that he, writing in 1927, would consider an eighteen-year-old girl who abandons her mother and farm for an unnamed foreigner of questionable character and intentions a recipe for happiness.

Another dubious candidate in the race to win the title of conventional “happy ending” recipient would be the aforementioned Hannie Rader in *Roadside*. Hannie does in fact achieve a happy ending of sorts: she does literally ride off into the sunset with the man of her choosing, even with her widower father’s support and consent. But Hannie is no exemplar of the conventional woman of her day, and her happy ending stands on no moral grounds whatsoever, for Hannie’s conventional “happy ending” is over before the play has even begun. Hannie was previously married to a milquetoast farmer named Buzzey, with whom she became bored. To achieve a divorce, Hannie hires another woman to seduce Buzzey, all the while spurning his sexual advances in an effort to spur on his “need” for an adulterous affair. Buzzey does fall for the other woman, who by agreement allows Hannie to catch him in the act, thereby making her request to the court for a divorce a fairly simple and assured affair. Once divorced, Hannie returns to the open road with her father till she falls for the larger than life criminal Texas, a man who breaks out of prison, destroying both the court and the jail in the process. Texas and Hannie have an instantly stormy and highly sexualized connection, and it is this connection that both solidifies her wandering way of life and reassures her that she is who she ought to be. From a contemporary perspective, one could argue that Hannie does have an authentic happy ending, that the end of the play is in fact almost proto-feminist. Hannie has waded her way through some bad life choices but has now made peace with herself and her present situation; she is in charge of her life and is to some extent self-actualized. However, given the plethora of tragic heroines in Riggs’s work, this does not seem to be his intent. For Hannie to be a feminist heroine in 1930, a heroine who hires a whore to con her husband out of his marriage only to fall for a darkly sexual “bad boy” on the run from the law, a heroine whose first substantive line in the play begins, “God damn it, Pap!” runs counter to all conventional common decency of the period (*Roadside*

6). Rather, it seems more likely that Riggs was amused by the idea that a woman who rejected all conventional decency and remained steadfastly unrepentant in her perceived moral decrepitude could actually find happiness, an idea so absurdly contrary to the established code of contemporary women's conduct that he could not help but label the play a comedy. For Riggs, women did not have happy endings, and if they did it was found in the absurdity of fantasy, or at the very least comedy.

Within his work the source of these unhappy endings is typically found in one of two scenarios: either the woman has been "led astray" by a man and is coping with a sullied reputation, or she has been headstrong, choosing to make her own decisions rather than be led by a man or her mother, with the same result. By this reckoning almost all of Riggs's women either wind up dead, emotionally dead, or as whores. Furthermore, what is undeniably ubiquitous across the canon are the perceived facts that women are not capable of knowing their own minds, that they cannot survive in either The Indian Territory or later Oklahoma without the protection and guidance of a man—white or other—and that a woman's reputation is of more worth than the woman herself, and once damaged the woman is of little if any value. Time and again in Riggs's work women are reminded that they are both incapable of protecting themselves and of making rational decisions on behalf of themselves, all the while needing no reminding that their reputations are their sole key to social acceptance and authentic happiness.

Kay in *Russet Mantle* and Willie in *Sump'n Like Wings* are both impregnated by men that cannot or choose not to support them. Kay leaves her comfortable society life to go off to an uncertain future with her socialist poet boyfriend, while Willie is abandoned and her baby dies. Toni in *Hang Onto Love* avoids pregnancy, but instead, after a one night stand with Jude follows a path of such prostitution and debauchery, when years later offered a second chance with Jude

she sees herself as incapable of accepting it. Annie Marble's past in *A Lantern to See By* is never given; however, hers is such a checkered one that she views a promised position in a whorehouse as a step up from her present life as a kept woman and housekeeper. In each aforementioned case the woman's reputation is such that it is perceived that no redemption is capable; she is essentially among the living dead. Perhaps Betty in *Big Lake* is the sad epitome of this circumstance.

Betty has in fact done nothing wrong, save be led early to Big Lake by Lloyd with the innocent intention of watching the sun rise over the lake before their classmates arrive for a picnic. As circumstances unfold Lloyd is framed for a murder he did not commit and Betty is accused by her schoolmistress, Miss Meredith, of sexual misconduct in the woods with Lloyd. Attempting to escape in a rowboat, Lloyd is shot dead by the police. Betty, incapable of proving her innocence and knowing that Miss Meredith will not relent, chooses to drown herself rather than live her life in disgrace. This play, the second that Riggs published, brings together many of the tragic themes inherent in all his work. Firstly, from a certain point of view Lloyd has led Betty astray, though his intentions are presented as innocent. He wants to share the sunrise with Betty but has not considered how his desires may appear to society or what the consequences to her may be. Secondly, Betty, representative of all women, has no voice in the defense of her reputation; her reputation is to be decided for her. She is a minor compared to Miss Meredith, hence she has no standing, and the situation does appear inappropriate. Therefore what looks inappropriate must be as such and Betty must be labeled unclean. Finally, and perhaps most tragically, it is at the hands of another woman that a woman's reputation is to be decided and the sentence carried out. Miss Meredith could listen to Betty, assume her innocence, and offer counsel and safety, but she does not. Instead, Miss Meredith assumes the worst and inadvertently

condemns Betty to a watery death. Women are rarely magnanimous to other women in Riggs's work, especially older women to the younger generation.

Martha Buster in *Knives from Syria* states openly that, "I've always wanted that and you know it. Ye'll have t'marry him, Rhodie" (*Knives from Syria* 195). Her daughter, Rhodie, is to have no say in her choice of a husband. Mrs. Buster will see Rhodie married to Charley, a hired hand twice her age, because they need a man to help on the farmstead. After all, as she puts it, "Whut good ud us women be without one?" (*Knives from Syria* 195) Rhodie, frustrated by her mother's iron lock on her life, runs away with the Syrian Peddler to an uncertain future. Similarly, Mrs. Baker in *Sump'n Like Wings* won't even allow Willie to go swimming down to the creek with a gang of teens for fear of what the boys might do. In defiance, Willie runs away with the married "Boy" Huntington only to be abandoned by him after she becomes pregnant.

Both Rhodie and Willie accept responsibility for their actions, though they have been coerced into their decisions by men, and both daughters have mothers that accept no responsibility for their adolescent children's actions. Mrs. Baker, though warned in scene 1 by the hotel guest Mrs. Clovis, and by her own brother that holding on too tight to Willie could bring about her ruin, will heed no advice. In their final scene together, Mrs. Baker absolves herself of all responsibility with respect to Willie's upbringing, all the while basing her shunning on the false assumption that Willie has turned to prostitution to survive. Willie has not, at least not yet, but like Betty has been caught in an indefensible situation (a man has followed her back to her seedy boarding house and has made unwanted advances that Mrs. Baker walks in on) and with her mother acting as both judge and jury has no recourse except to be labeled a whore.

In both examples, as in *Big Lake*, it is a woman of some authority pronouncing sentence on someone younger on the basis of circumstantial evidence, each time with ruinous consequences. The men by comparison in Riggs's work are far less judgmental, though given the patriarchal society they uphold they can afford to be as they are left largely unjudged themselves. The Syrian Peddler shows concern for neither the under-tended Buster farm, nor for Rhodie's reputation. Pap Rader shows no concern for Hannie's taking up with a criminal. Uncle Horace expresses concern for Kay's wellbeing but expresses equal if not greater concern for how his relation to her will affect his standing in "good society." This is not to say that there are no men of good character in Riggs's canon (though there do not seem to be many), but rather that women's reputations seem to be the exclusive purvey of the women themselves. It may be men who lead women to ruin, but it is the women themselves who ultimately condemn without redemption.

The exception to much of this analysis is Laurey Williams in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Laurey ends the play with her reputation wholly intact. She is not implicated in Jeeter's murder; her dismissal of Jeeter from the farm is not subject to investigation. She is married and, though her husband, Curly, is about to stand trial, her status as a woman seems unsullied. Laurey, unlike the other major women of the canon, evidences several notable differences that allow her some measure of peace at the close. Laurey has no parents. Both died when she was thirteen (she is eighteen during the play) and play no role in her young adulthood. Her aunt, Eller Murphy, has come to raise Laurey and manage the Williams farm as its steward, but the farm remains Laurey's property giving her a measure of status and mitigating the need to rebel against authority. Laurey is content, even anxious, to be a wife, mother, and farmer. Unlike the rest, Laurey seeks to reinforce the status quo in the Indian Territory; it can be assumed that after their

marriage Curly will manage the farm and their mutual affairs and she will have no objections to this. Laurey is intelligent without being devious; appropriately fearful of that which should be feared, but not afraid to stand up for herself. Laurey perceives that Jeeter will take advantage of her on the way to the play party and deftly arranges for Ado Annie to accompany them on the drive. Once arrived, Jeeter reveals himself and she fires him. She, it can be argued, appropriately enlists Curly's "muscle" to protect her from Jeeter's vengeance, but it is she alone that takes decisive action against Jeeter and his unwanted sexual advances. Many of these distinctions make Laurey appear strong, likable and perhaps proto-feminist in much the same way Abigail Adams is viewed in relation to John. However, it is also important to note that Laurey is lacking several contemporary feminine virtues. Particularly as previously stated, Laurey seeks the status quo without dreams of personal distinction and with full acceptance of the deference she will owe her husband. Indeed, her self-image is inextricably bound to his view of her. As she says in their courtship, "I jist set here and listen at you, and don't keer whut you say about me. Say I'm homely's a mud fence, you want to – why then, I am homely's a mud fence. 'F you say I'm purty, why I'm purty as anything, and got a voice like Jenny Lind" (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 73). Earlier in the play, Aunt Eller indicates that Laurey does not really know her own mind; that what she does and what she wants are out of sync with each other. According to Aunt Eller, "A womern that won't let you tetch her 'th a ten foot pole like that is jist dyin' fer you to git closer'n that to her" (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 15). Though Laurey escapes relatively unscathed from Riggs's pen, one must wonder what degree of respect he actually holds for her. While Riggs's other women—many of them stronger, smarter, and more adventurous—fall victim to their own vices and the machinations of many a predatory male or a domineering mother, simple unsophisticated Laurey aims relatively low and achieves the greatest measure of happiness of

them all. Either Riggs is suggesting that the exceptional woman searching for more in or beyond the Indian Territory is doomed to be a casualty of her own claustrophobic upbringing coupled with an ignorance of the ways of the world when she asserts herself, or else he is suggesting that given the harsh patriarchy in place the most successful and survivable way to be a woman is to strive for the status quo, marry well and relinquish control of one's life beyond the home. In either case, all Riggs's portrayals of women are a dismal example of the exceptional as tragic and the average as stultified.

VIEWS ON MEN

“Over and over! The way them men done. The things they said.”
 – Laurey in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, page 91

The men in Riggs’s work are both more numerous and more diverse in their natures and ultimate rewards; however, there are certain types that do make significant reappearances throughout his canon. The “Syrian Peddler” type only makes appearances in *Knives from Syria* and *Green Grow the Lilacs*; the less tangible concept of foreign incursion into the Indian Territory is rarely lacking in the rhetoric and motivations of Riggs’s characters. The “Criminal” both hardened and redeemable is a somewhat common figure. The “Domineering Father” resurfaces over several plays: *Out of Dust*, *A Lantern to See By*, *Russet Mantle* and *A World Elsewhere*, and is sometimes notable by his absence. The “Troubled Idealistic Poet-Boy” is fairly common, finding his way into *Big Lake*, *The Cream in the Well*, *A Lantern to See By*, *Out of Dust*, *Russet Mantle*, *A World Elsewhere*, and *The Year of Pilár*. Perhaps least numerous are “Sage Elder Men,” however when they do appear in *Cherokee Night*, *Hang Onto Love* and *Sump’n Like Wings* their presence is often powerful and cryptic.

Lynn Riggs was a poet/playwright who wrote about the life, people and cultures that he was familiar with, grew up with. He was not a playwright that imagined places and stories and then strove to fill in the blanks with research, except in the rarest of instances, such as his setting of the produced but unpublished *More Sky* in Atlantis. Almost without fail his stories are drawn from what was familiar to him, variations on a lived theme with a romanticized twist or a shockingly tragic finale. He had lived his research. This is not to say that his plays were “ripped from the headlines” of his immediate experience though that cannot be totally ruled out, but rather to say that Riggs’s style was to take what he had seen and fashion it into a story worthy of presentation, a style not uncommon to his generation—think O’Neill. For this reason many of his

plays contain themes and archetypes that resurface again and again: the inability of a father to understand his poetic or “soft-natured” son, the erosion of the Indian Territory’s identity at the hands of a faceless national government, the morally forbidden love, the self-absorbed mother, the wise aunt, uncle, or friend of the family. Lynn without question wrote what he knew and what he had seen, so it is not unfair to associate Lynn’s past with his creations when studying his work, especially his male characters. In several respects Lynn was troping his life experience. This is never more evident than in his working and reworking of the “Domineering Father” and the “Troubled Idealistic Poet-Boy.”

Lynn’s relationship with his father was poor at best. As a result Lynn ceremoniously kills his father onstage in at least two of his published plays, *Out of Dust* and *A Lantern to See By*, has the father dead at the rise of *Sump’n Like Wings*, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and *Knives from Syria*, and renders him ignorant or useless in *Russet Mantle*, *Cream in the Well*, and *The Year of Pilár*. Generally speaking, adult white men in Riggs’s work are either dominant or self-serving bordering on evil, out of touch with the needs of the coming generation, or dead, rendering them harmless. Adult white men may have the hegemonic power in Riggs’s Oklahoma and abroad but they are reviled more than they are lauded, circumvented more than obeyed. In the two plays that culminate in patricide this dearth of respectability is never more evident. Old Man Grant in *Out of Dust* and John Harmon in *A Lantern to See By* are the epitome of domineering, selfish tyrants that need to be deposed rather than tolerated. In both cases the deposition means death for the father and ruination for the son.

In *A Lantern to See By* the antagonism between father and son is established early and reiterated throughout. Jodie Harmon is the youngest son of Thursey and John and something of a “momma’s boy.” In scene one he enters having been beaten with a pinch bar by his father for not

throwing himself into his assigned farm chores with enough conviction. Thurseley does not comprehend the resentment between the two. She only knows that John wanted a daughter when Jodie was born and seems to hold him accountable for his own gender. When Thurseley dies from pregnancy complications Annie Marble, a young local girl, takes her place as cook and housekeeper on the farm. She is saving up enough money to move away and make a life for herself but John starts soliciting sexual favors from her and comes to prefer their arrangement, going so far as to withhold her pay in an effort to keep her on the property.

Annie, sensing that Jodie is different and perhaps useful, turns her affections towards the son who most misses his mother. What follows is a jealous power struggle between father and son, with the father determined to keep things as they are and the son determined to liberate the household from his father's tyranny, and in so doing win the girl. In the end Jodie publicly kills his father and to his surprise Annie is outraged. She only wanted Jodie to get her money from John so she could run off to an offered position in a whorehouse; instead she is an accessory to murder. Jodie has proven himself a man by killing his father, but done it for the wrong reasons and in such a way that he will almost certainly hang. To juxtapose the fictional John and Jodie's relationship with that of Lynn and his father Grant is to make no great leap at all. Grant never openly approved of his son's demeanor and career goals, and he did take a serving girl into their house and make her his mistress after the fact. This woman, who became Lynn's stepmother, was never kind to Lynn, driving him and his father even farther apart. Lynn's "revenge" was to take the essence of the relationship into his art, ceremonially killing his father while labeling his stepmother a whore, all the while acknowledging within the work that his inability to bring authentic closure to the relationship would result in personal tragedy. His working through of

these same demons in *Out of Dust* was no less personal and in fact proved so close to home that he gave the father in the play his father's own name: Grant.

In *Out of Dust*, an openly acknowledged riff on the myth of King Lear, three boys are set to inherit a cattle business from their hard-nosed father, Old Man Grant. Grant both admires and despises his youngest son, Jeff, for being his own person and yet not being the hardened man that Grant wishes him to be. The older boys are jealous of the relationship which puts them at odds with their father and sibling. In a move calculated to test the boys' mettle Grant fires King, the trail sub-boss or second in command, and puts Jeff in charge. King, a fairly one-dimensional villain with a penchant for manipulation and scheming, convinces the elder boys, Teece and Bud, that Grant means to swindle them out of their inheritance and give the full business over to Jeff. They confront Jeff with this, who neither wants the business for himself nor wants to see the boys disinherited. Playing on his twisted sense of moral obligation King, Teece, and Bud convince Jeff that Grant must die and with him dead each will rightfully inherit. Once settled, King kills Grant, then implicates all three boys in the murder, planning to extort the business for himself, assuming that the boys will work for him rather than admit to being accessories in their own father's murder.

The scheming runs too deep for Jeff who has an attack of conscience and runs off with his intended, Rose, in an attempt to turn himself in. They are pursued to a cabin where Rose, not Jeff, ultimately steps out of the shadows and kills King, breaking the cycle of violence and freeing Jeff to turn all of them in to the federal marshals. The play ends as it began with a framing device: Maudie, Teece's wife, narrating the tale to a court ordered psychologist and ruminating on the darkness that lives inside each man and how easily it can overwhelm the light. Bud and Teece have fled toward Mexico but are expected to be caught, Jeff and Maudie are in

custody, and Rose is likely to escape imprisonment on the grounds of self-defense, though psychologically she has been changed and her innocence permanently lost.

Though *A Lantern to See By* was written in 1926 and *Out of Dust* was written in 1948, they cover much the same ground despite the years with only a few notable exceptions, indicating that while Lynn's relationship with his father may have evolved or softened some it is still essentially one of distrust and disappointment for both men. In *Out of Dust* Old Man Grant evidences a grudging respect for Jeff. True, Grant still wishes Jeff to be the hard-driving cattle rancher of a son of his desires but he also acknowledges that Jeff has a personal compass and that he has some strength of his convictions. By comparison John Harmon shows no signs of understanding Jodie and openly beats and derides him in front of his siblings. Grant shows no real respect for any of his children while John seems to have a more solid relationship with his elder sons. In both plays Jeff and Jodie are derided by their brothers for being different, soft, or intellectually curious, a theme common to many of the siblings evident throughout the canon.

Another subtle difference is the rationale for why each murder takes place. In *Out of Dust*, Grant perceives a strength in his youngest that spurs him to place Jeff in charge of the herd as a sort of test of leadership. Jeff fails the test when, rather than following his own moral compass, he goes along with his brothers and King in their plot to murder Grant; although he almost instantly regrets the choice, by then the die is cast. Jodie, on the other hand, has no such self-reflection. John Harmon is a monstrous bully of a father that must be eliminated. Jodie's love for Annie drives him into a crime of passion, recklessly and sloppily, but in the end his regret is not that John is dead, but rather that Annie does not truly love him. Both Jodie and Jeff covet and kill but the circumstances of Grant and Jeff's relationship make it the greater tragedy.

In both cases it appears evident that Lynn was attempting to exorcise the demon of his father's spirit with marginal success.

If Old Man Grant and John Harmon epitomize a "Domineering Father" archetype in Riggs's work than surely Jodie and Jeff are but two examples of the "Troubled Idealistic Poet-Boy" that seem to reincarnate throughout much of the published canon. Indeed, Jodie and Jeff represent the extreme pole that is the antithesis of the dominant father but a whole range of other young men flesh out the field, many of whom fight against society rather than any one father figure. "Boy" Huntington in *Sump'n Like Wings*, John Galt in *Russet Mantle*, Jude Summers in *Hang Onto Love*, Lloyd in *Big Lake*, and Trino Crespo in *The Year of Pilár* all fit this description. All aforementioned men are having trouble adhering to societal norms. All are in some way artistically minded, soft, or "feminized." All are searching various ideological systems hoping to find some answers to a society that makes no sense to them. And none are portrayed as succeeding in this endeavor.

"Boy" Huntington pursues Willie Baker before, during, and after his marriage to another woman. Despite Willie's polite protestations to the contrary, Boy cannot let the idea of being married to Willie go. At the end of Act One, he achieves his goal and runs off with her and fathers a child, but the marriage and the happiness do not last. Willie is not the woman he believes her to be, and he eventually abandons her for another woman. Despite the abandonment he periodically meanders back into Willie's life, looking for her to become the woman she never was. Boy cannot hold down a job, the baby dies, and he drifts from woman to woman searching for something that he can ever find: an ideal "savior" in a woman's body. Boy achieves no peace.

Lloyd in *Big Lake* serves as something of an antecedent to “Boy.” On the surface of *Big Lake* (no pun intended) Lloyd just wants time alone with Betty down by the lake as they watch the sunrise together, a seemingly harmless pursuit. He makes no overt sexual advances, and if he has ulterior motives they remain unexplored. However, Lloyd repeatedly ignores Betty’s protestations that they should leave the area and meet up with their school group. Betty senses something dark in the forest rising up from the ground that scares her. Betty needs to be wary of tarnishing her reputation by being caught alone in the woods with a boy. Betty cautions against rowing out on the lake. Lloyd hears none of the warnings, trapped on a pathway of his own ambitions. Lloyd has led them to the lake, and he will lead them both to their death. He is a person of personal conviction who neither hears nor sees the warning signs placed before him. Riggs would express this singular method of thinking and absolution much later through Jeeter in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. After nearly raping Laurey he justifies his actions by spitting at her, “Cain’t he’p it, I tell you! Sump’n brung it on you. On me, too. Cain’t never rest. Cain’t be easy. That’s the way it is” (Jeeter, *Green Grow the Lilacs* 60). Starting with Lloyd in 1927, Riggs wrote and rewrote young male characters that were searching for their future often with disastrous results, all the while absolving themselves of personal responsibility. John, Jude and Trino fare no better.

John Galt in *Russet Mantle*, like Boy Huntington in *Sump’n Like Wings*, gets the girl pregnant, but unlike Boy he does not abandon her. Instead, he beds her in a chicken coop, gets her to leave her upper middle class world behind and join him in a nebulous crusade for socialism. No success on the horizon is ever projected, though the couple leaves the play in a rather grand exit. Jude Summers in *Hang Onto Love* similarly impregnates Toni Devereau but, unlike John, Jude abandons her, changes his identity and begins a whole new, albeit unfulfilling,

life as a domino parlor operator. In this scenario neither Jude nor Toni have ever found happiness, and in the end she determines that she cannot be happy with him after she commits murder on his behalf to protect his new identity. All three men use women to suit their own singular ambitions rather than develop loving partnerships that may have more long-lived and positive consequences. And all three men blindly bind themselves to subcultural ideologies that make them social outcasts with limited futures: John to socialism, Boy to migrant working, Jude to underworld gambling. Trino Crespo in *The Year of Pilár* bests them all. He abandons society altogether to live in a hut in Mexico with a *man*.

Trino Crespo is most certainly not the central figure of *The Year of Pilár*; that distinction falls to the eponymous Pilár, his sister. But his journey, though secondary to hers, is perhaps farther and more emblematic of Riggs's own personal journey. In the play Pilár, the headstrong eldest sister of a middle class Mexican family, bullies her entire family into relocating from New York City home to Mexico, where she believes a better life is waiting for them. The family soon breaks apart, with the youngest sister running away to the Caribbean to become a prostitute while an older brother ventures into a loveless marriage of convenience. In the end, unable to live with herself, Pilár immolates herself during a revolutionary uprising. It is hard to top Pilár's tragedy in terms of melodrama and spectacle in Riggs's canon; however, what she leaves behind is perhaps more important from a social and historical standpoint. Midway through the play Pilár's younger brother, Trino, abandons his family and sets up housekeeping in the woods in a jacal (a traditional Yucatánian hut dwelling) with Beto, a servant boy of close age to Trino. *The Year of Pilár* was published in 1947, and though there is no mention of the words "gay" or "homosexual" the implication from family members who visit the jacal is as evident as it is veiled. Both Pilár and Trino's mother implore him to come home, to abandon this way of life,

and to consider their feelings, but Trino is resolute. Though he was against the move to Mexico, he has found himself here and has no desire to abandon his newfound happiness. Only one scene later, Pilár, burns herself alive as the play concludes, leaving one to ponder what Riggs's intended audience reaction was. Did he wish to create sympathy for Pilár in creating an egocentric tragic heroine, or is her immolation his symbolic burning of all people who could not accept homosexuality? Indeed, in her final scene she refers to Beto, the servant boy, as brother; an acknowledgment of his and Trino's relationship only moments before her suicide. Whatever Riggs's true motivations, it is an unequivocal fact that one of Riggs's only truly happy and satisfied young male characters rejects society and lives openly with his gay partner in defiance of social norms and is treated as a hero by the playwright; a hero afforded, despite his sister's death, a happy ending.

Perhaps Riggs best summed up his views on men in his best known play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In his confrontation with Jeeter in the smokehouse, Curly articulates the two paths that a man may walk in the country. It is hard to not hear these same words coming out of Riggs's mind in relation to himself. Curly states, "In this country, they's two things you c'n do if you're a man. Live out of doors is one. Live in a hole is the other. How'd you git to be the way you air anyway – settin' here in this filthy hole – and thinkin' the way you're thinkin'? Why don't you do sump'n healthy onct in a while, 'stid of stayin' shet up here a-crawlin' and festerin'!" (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 50) Riggs traveled the world searching for an inner peace he could never fully give himself. Whether this discontent was a result of hiding his alleged homosexuality or his inability to connect fully with a broader audience through his writing is a matter of conjecture. What does seem evident is that Riggs valued truth to oneself, and the courage to live one's life according to one's personal compass. His few successful young male

characters evidence a courage of their convictions even if many of them lose their way and pay an ultimate price for their vision. The question remains whether Riggs saw himself as courageous or cowardly. However, given that most of Riggs's "Troubled Idealistic Poet-Boys" meet less than satisfactory ends one can make an educated guess that he saw himself as one of the losers in life; an ideologue and poet in search of an elusive pulpit. Time, it would seem, has proven him correct.

VIEWS ON MINORITIES: BLACKS, MEXICANS, AND HOMOSEXUALS

“Niggers’ll *kill* - and not *keer*! It don’t bother ‘em none!” – Art in *The Cherokee Night*, page 162

Riggs’s handling of his only homosexual characters, Trino and Beto in *The Year of Pilár*, has already been addressed in the previous section. Although they are supporting players to a much larger and tragic story, that of Pilár, their essential end is one of happiness and fulfillment. Riggs wrote no other gay characters into his published work and there is no written record of how these characters were handled by the actors or received by the general public. One can only assume that their reception and genuine character arc was largely lost under the melodramatic finale that is Pilár’s end. Likewise, Riggs left no notes on these characters as to what his true motivations for their writing may have been. On the surface he treats Trino and Beto’s relationship with a heroic dignity that he affords few other characters in his body of work. One could surmise that Riggs felt a kinship to these two and perhaps given more time would have written additional gay characters into his work. However, *Pilár* premiered just seven years before Riggs’s death, and his playwright’s voice had become sluggish and harder to find a medium from which to be heard. Perhaps Riggs had made peace with his own identity and did not wish to write that part of his personal life into his work. Perhaps he sensed his work was simply too incendiary for the times and contradictory to his broader reputation (being that most people knew him by the late 1940s as the *Oklahoma* playwright). Perhaps he did not wish to associate himself with the wider trend of gay themed plays that almost always ended with homosexuals recanting their lifestyle through tragedy, such as in Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*. For whatever reason Riggs, quite possibly a closeted homosexual, wrote two gay characters in one relatively obscure play and never addressed the lifestyle again. On the other

hand, though he never wrote a black character into his works his offhand references to them in the pejorative sense were no less than rampant.

From *Sump 'n Like Wings* in 1927 through to his last plays in the early 1950s Riggs peppered his plays with sayings, slang, and songs that demean and dehumanize African-Americans in the most commonplace of ways. His usage of the word “nigger” is as ubiquitous as it is offensive, flowing from the mouths of men and women regardless of status of birth. In *Sump 'n Like Wings*, Uncle Jim, the closest thing the play has to a wise male has the distinction of sharing a stereotypical joke at the expense of the black man. “It’s like the nigger porter who meets all the trains for the Ione Hotel in Vinita. That’s the name of it – the Hotel Ione. This nigger went up to a man and says, ‘C’mon, and go to de best hotel in dis town.’ The man says, ‘What hotel is that?’ ‘Why de Hotel Ione!’ says the nigger. ‘Well!’ says the man, ‘if a nigger owns the best hotel in town, I’m goin on to Coffeyville” (*Sump 'n Like Wings* 44). This is what passes for comedy in Riggs’s work and the joke serves as an exit line for the likeable Uncle Jim.

In *A Lantern to See By*, a play written concurrently with *Sump 'n* the “humor” is even darker as Harmon brothers, Dick and Stick, sing a verse of a song at a public play party:

Teacher, teacher, don’t whip me,
Whip that nigger *behind* that tree.
He stole money, I stole none.
Put him in the calaboose *jist* for fun! (*A Lantern to See By* 128)

As indicated in Riggs’s own stage directions, the song is met with “applause and laughter”, signaling general approval of the language by the people in attendance (*A Lantern to See By* 128). Later in the play Stick, racing to a wash pan, challenges Dick to a race with the epithet,

“Last one thar’s a nigger baby!” (*A Lantern to See By* 143) The vast majority of Riggs’s published work contain at least one or two racial slurs per play, often incorporating the use of the word “nigger” when referring to African-Americans, always in a pejorative context, and almost always received nonchalantly to positively by the onstage listener. When “nigger” is not used, “brown” or “colored” is often substituted as in Clabe’s remark to Julie in *The Cream in the Well*: “They can take over the little yellow people or the little brown people for the good of their heathen souls – but they can do it without me” (*The Cream in the Well* 208). In this instance Africans are reduced to the slang “little brown people” and the fact that they are perceived as non-Christian is further evidence of their subordinate status. Perhaps the hardest racial slurs to accept in Riggs’s canon are those that come out of the mouths of his most beloved characters, Laurey and Aunt Eller, in *Green Grow the Lilacs*.

In Scene Two of *Green Grow* Laurey recites her wish list to Aunt Eller. “Wish’t I lived in the White House, and had diamonds on my shoes, and a little nigger boy to fan me - when it was hot” (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 24). Later in the same scene Aunt Eller’s reaction to Laurey’s excessive use of face powder is to exclaim, “Look like a nigger angel turned all white and shinin’” (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 38). Much later in the play Aunt Eller, commenting on the weather, blithely recites a popular saying, “More rain, more rest, more niggers from the West” (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 89). Under Hammerstein’s sterilizing hands this language disappeared from *Oklahoma!*; however, Riggs’s characters as originally written, regardless of motivation or likeability, are quite simply enculturated to use racial epithets in casual conversation.

To Riggs’s credit he does not try to whitewash the local color of his origin nor romanticize the language of the population even in his most romanticized of plays. Nor does he present racially pejorative language as anything but commonplace. The fact that most of his

plays contain African-American racial slurs though no African-American characters exist in the canon is cause for speculation. Though Riggs acknowledges the existence of African-Americans in the Indian Territory through his casual rhetoric it could not be more evident by their absence that he is not interested in connecting with them or telling their stories. It would also seem evident that within the periods that Riggs sets his various plays there is very little fraternization between the white and black races. It is enough to acknowledge their existence and display commentary on that existence; it is not necessary to actually write a black character that could humanize and offset the prejudicial opinions held casually by most of his characters.

Riggs is not known to have harbored any particular prejudices against blacks in his private or professional life; therefore the answer must lie elsewhere. Riggs identified himself as a white man with Cherokee blood whose allegiance was seemingly more to the Indian Territory than to the United States. Where he displays the greatest interest in race relations is between those of Native American descent versus the White Man. Simply put: the black man's journey was not of interest to Riggs beyond his usage in conversation as a casual slur or a punch-line and his writing reflects that non-interest. Along with the African-American the Asian-American fared no better.

No Asian-Americans appear in the published works of Lynn Riggs, and any references are pejorative and serve as a punch line. In this case, Asian-Americans or Asians are referred to simply as yellow or "the yellow people." The most pronounced episode of Asian bashing is found in *Big Lake* where the children in Miss Meredith's class begin singing a colloquial song called "Ole Joe Clark." As they sing, the children insert three verses into the song that seem to have no relevance to the plot of the ballad except to make fun of Asian women.

“I wouldn’t marry a yellow gal,
 Tell you the reason why –
 Cross-eyed tears run down her back
 When she starts to cry.” (*Big Lake 57*)

And again after a chorus:

“I wouldn’t marry a yellow gal,
 Tell you the reason why –
 Her neck’s so long an’ stringy,
 I’m ‘fraid she’d never die” (*Big Lake 57*).

Then finally:

“I wouldn’t marry a yellow gal,
 Tell you the reason why –
 She’d blow her nose in yellow corn bread
 An’ call it punkin’ pie!” (*Big Lake 58*)

To Riggs’s credit he does have the attendant school teacher Miss Meredith reprimand the children for singing the verses: “That’s no way to act. Those verses are not very nice, Bud Bickel. They’re bad taste” (*Big Lake 58*). But Miss Meredith’s admonishment falls on deaf ears and the subject is dropped. There are perhaps two rationales for the inclusion of these verses in the play, one functional and one dramatic, depending on how much credit one wishes to give Riggs at this stage of his dramatic development. Miss Meredith’s admonishment of the “yellow” verses establishes that there is such a thing as “good taste” in the Indian Territory while simultaneously exposing the hypocrisy in her own thinking. Miss Meredith objects to the “yellow” verses because they stereotype and denigrate a particular people. However, when asked by Betty to believe that she and Lloyd were innocently viewing the lake by sunrise, Miss Meredith cannot offer Betty the same non-judgmental, broadminded level of thought. To her, young girls that run off with boys into the woods only do so to pursue sexual relations and nothing Betty can say will change her mind. She has, in essence, stereotyped Betty as a harlot in the manner that she asks her schoolchildren to not do to Asian women. If this was Riggs’s intent,

credit must be given to the way he masterfully layers character flaws into a supporting character whose sole function is in judging Betty and in so doing driving her to suicide. However, one must conclude that very little is gained from this extra-dimensional character flaw in Miss Meredith with relation to the overall plot.

It seems far more likely that Riggs included the song near the top of Act Two as a set piece for the supernumeraries that do not appear in Act One, in this case the school children, as a genuine crowd pleaser for the audience after the intermission. *Big Lake* is a somber and dark play. What better way to alleviate the mood than to have a song and dance to begin the second act? Structurally this makes sense and sets the audience up for a higher fall, as after the song Lloyd will be shot and Betty will drown herself. In this case, the ugly truth remains that Riggs chose a song that denigrates Asians with the knowledge that his audience would enjoy the racial slurs rather than find them offensive. Based upon the reviews and success of the play from 1927 to the present (it is only one of a handful of his plays still published with licensing rights for production available) he was right. “Yellow” racism is an enculturated - and to this day socially accepted - way of thinking in America, and Riggs seems to have been as much a perpetrator as a victim of this mindset. By contrast, his treatment of Mexicans, though also rooted in stereotypes, was more immediate, evenhanded, and diverse.

Mexicans or Mexican-Americans figure prominently in three of Riggs’s plays, *A World Elsewhere*, *Russet Mantle*, and *The Year of Pilár*, and in each play a different class is highlighted. In *Russet Mantle* the Mexican-Americans are servants and household staff working for the Kincaids, a white husband and wife that have relocated to New Mexico. In *The Year of Pilár* the focus is on the Crespo family, an upper middle class Mexican family originally from the Yucatán that has been living in New York and is maneuvered into relocating back to Mexico

by the headstrong daughter, Pilár. In *A World Elsewhere* a white family vacationing in Mexico is caught up in a political junta led by the charismatic General Aguirre. In this play, there is a mix of lower working class Mexicans similar to those in *Russet Mantle*, but the primary focus is on the battle of wits that takes place between the military led by Aguirre and the central white female, Claire Bodine.

If it can be said that Riggs trades in Mexican stereotypes, it would be in his portrayal of the working classes in both *A World Elsewhere* and *Russet Mantle*. In both cases Riggs writes the accent into the language (not uncommon in early twentieth-century playwriting) and makes use of familiar, perhaps stereotypical, jargon and speech patterns. Pablo, the Kincaid's manservant in *Russet Mantle* has the following line which is representative of how all Mexican-Americans speak in the play: "Si. The leetle bugs – they doan like to eat poison. It makes them seeck. They crawl – on three legs, on two legs, they curl up in their holes, they croak dead" (*Russet Mantle* 7). This broken English patterning is repeated amongst the working classes in *A World Elsewhere*, however, in this case Riggs peppers in Spanish as part of the sentence structure to create the effect of a servant class speaking English as a second language. By example Señora Ortega, the villa owner and cook says, "Leetle boys should eat all the time – that is right – so they grow beeg, *no es verdad?* And the old lady – maybe *she* like the cheecken, no?" (*A World Elsewhere* 79) Despite the potentially stereotypical language and structure, it would be an error to assume that Riggs was deliberately denigrating Mexicans through his portrayals. Riggs lived in New Mexico during one of the more happy and prolific periods of his writing career, and it is more likely that his writing is reflective of what he heard or thought he heard. His portrayals of the Crespo family and of General Aguirre are as three-dimensional as they are sympathetic.

In *The Year of Pilár*, the Crespo family, a middle class Mexican family headed by a doctor, Don Severo, agrees to return to the family hacienda in the Yucatán, leaving behind their new life in New York. More or less landed gentry in the Yucatán, they get caught in a military junta seeking to overthrow the upper classes, the details of which are sketchy in the play at best. The events of the play take place in 1937, the play was published in 1945, and Riggs almost certainly assumed knowledge of these events in his audience. Severed from their life in New York and caught in the crossfire in Mexico, the Crespo family fractures, with mother and father fleeing the family hacienda for the city where fighting is contained, brother Fernando consenting to a loveless marriage for safety, brother Trino going native, sister Chela settling in the islands as a high class prostitute, and sister Pilár's aforementioned self-immolation. Although the family retains the flavor of Riggs's interpretation of Spanish syntax, his overall treatment of the family is one of respect. It is true that the Crespos evidence certain stereotypical traits associated with Mexicans, such as mother Doña Candita's preoccupation with Catholicism and the Virgin Mary, and the younger sibling's glorification of American culture, but again one must consider that these stereotypical traits had a strong basis in fact in the 1930s, and it seems likely Riggs wrote merely what he saw. His portrayal of General Aguirre in *A World Elsewhere* no doubt came from the same line of thinking.

In *A World Elsewhere*, General Gonzalo Fernandez Aguirre is described by Riggs as the following: "*He is an astonishing figure, swathed in a voluminous black cape, his smart military boots glimpsed beneath. His face is a yellowish white. His hair is prematurely grey, stand up stiffly. His nose is large, with great wing-like nostrils. He has black saggy brows and a cruel sensuous mouth. He has a dynamic Fascistic energy – where it springs from, it is impossible to tell right off*" (*A World Elsewhere* 112-113). Though he is native-born Mexican, he speaks with

eloquence and a command of English that is unlike Riggs's other non-American creations. He is brusque in his demeanor at first with respect to the Americans but soon settles in to a courtship dance/battle of wits with one of the American women, Claire, whom he wishes to bed as a conquest. When it becomes apparent that Claire is only toying with him to buy time to secure her family safe passage to the American Embassy, and that his forces have simultaneously lost the military upper hand in the concurrent street junta, he graciously accepts defeat and leaves the Americans unharmed in the hacienda presumably to fight another day. In the hands of a different playwright General Aguirre might be written as savage, dull-witted, lascivious, or subhuman. In Riggs's hands he is charmingly arrogant, handsome, socially and militarily intelligent and ultimately a gracious loser.

Of any of the minorities represented in Riggs's works, with the exception of Native Americans and to a lesser extent Syrians or Arabs⁴, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans seem to be the most fairly portrayed. Though Riggs does resort to stereotyped speech patterns and phrases in his lower class characters, he nonetheless treats all his characters of Mexican descent with honesty, sensitivity, and respect. It is also noteworthy that nowhere in his published works are derogatory remarks made collectively against Mexican peoples. African-Americans and Asian-Americans are absent from Riggs's work, though they clearly exist in the Indian Territory, and by his characters are generally and offhandedly maligned. Conversely, numerous Mexicans and Mexican-Americans appear throughout, and yet no pejorative remarks are made about them by the white inhabitants. By inference, it would seem that Riggs was sympathetic to the Mexican inhabitants of both his past and his canon while, if not being racist personally was at the very least unconcerned with offending blacks and Asians.

⁴ The unnamed Syrian Peddler of *Knives from Syria* and Ali Hakim in *Green Grow the Lilacs* are in many respects the same character, expanded for the latter play. Both have amorous intentions and exhibit huckster-like behavior, but they are otherwise one-dimensional caricatures that represent a stock type more than an ethnicity.

VIEWS ON SOVREIGNTY VS. STATEHOOD

“Why, the way you’re sidin’ with the federal marshal, you’d think us people out here lived in the United States!” – Aunt Eller in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, page 103

In the two plays where the subjects of statehood, the US Government, and its effect on the Indian Territory are addressed, *The Cherokee Night* and *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the United States is characterized as a faraway and faceless aggressor that has usurped the power and ability of the local inhabitants to rule themselves. Though *Green Grow the Lilacs* at its core is little more than a love triangle with song interludes, allegiance to one’s territory is ultimately what grants Curly a stay from prison on his wedding night. Aunt Eller slyly preys on this allegiance: “Tryin’ to take a bridegroom away from his bride! Why the way you’re sidin’ with the federal marshal, you’d think us people out here lived in the United States! Why, we’re territory folks – we ort to hang together! I don’t mean *hang* – I mean stick. Whut’s the United States? It’s jist a furrin country to me. And *you* supportin’ it! Jist dirty ole furriners, ever last one of you” (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 103).

The reaction to her calling into question their loyalties to the Indian Territory is immediate and unanimous. The posse variously speaks the following unassigned lines: “Now, Aunt Eller, we hain’t furriners. My pappy and mammy was both borned in Indian Territory! Why I’m jist plumb full of Indian blood myself” (*Green Grow the Lilacs* 103). While it is worth noting that the play is set in 1900 and the Indian Territory would not become the state of Oklahoma until 1907, to assume that Aunt Eller is merely pointing out that they are not citizens of the United States would be both incorrect and missing the point. The Indian Territory had been considered part of the United States after President Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and all inhabitants of the territory were considered citizens of the United States. Of course, white Americans were afforded rights and privileges that non-whites were not, though by 1900 native

peoples and whites had so interbred in the territory that it was considered rare to find a white person that had no Native-Americans in their ancestry. The question became then not one of race but rather of cultural inheritance. Aunt Eller, like most if not all of the characters in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, is the descendant of both races—it is never defined on a case by case basis—and yet her allegiance is to the broad ancestral culture of her native land, i.e. Native American.

The play further insinuates that most of the inhabitants of this corner of the Indian Territory are similarly culturally aligned. As a result, being given an ultimatum between being true to their Native American ancestry or siding with the “establishment” that is the faceless United States, the posse pledge allegiance to the Indian Territory and Curly is released from prison, at least for the time being. While cultural inheritance and allegiance play minor though important parts of resolving the events of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, it is the central and tragic theme of all of *The Cherokee Night*.

The Cherokee Night is more a tapestry of seven non-linear thematically connected scenes than a play in the traditional sense. Set loosely on and around Claremore Mound, an ancient burial mountain where the last great battle between the Osage and Cherokee nations was fought, *The Cherokee Night* tracks the lives of six part-Cherokee men and women: Viney Jones, Audeal Coombs, Bee Newcomb, Hutch Moree, Art Osburn and Gar Breeden, from a picnic on the Mound in 1915 to a final encounter between Viney and her sister, Sarah, in 1931. The seventh and final scene is reset on Claremore Mound as a kind of prequel and details the hunting down and execution of Edgar Breeden, a Cherokee outlaw revealed to be the father of both Gar and Bee. Upon his death, wife Marthy speaks a sort of eulogy that metaphorically ties all the subsequent events of the play together into a tragic whole wherein his death is viewed as the catalyst: “You’re at rest. Sleep. Your disgrace, your wickedness, your pain and trouble live on a

while longer. In her child, in my child. In all people born now, about to be born. Someday, the agony will end. Yours has. Ours will. Maybe not in the night of death, the cold dark night, without stars. Maybe in the sun. It's got to! It's what we live for" (*The Cherokee Night* 210).

Of the five internal scenes in *The Cherokee Night*, while not all end in death, all raise the questions of cultural inheritance, allegiance and assimilation. Each scene is pitched tragically as either the central figure of Cherokee descent is killed or made in some way to recant their ancestry in favor of the new hegemony, a blend of white and assimilated Osage cultures. Scene Two tells the story of Art and Bee. Art, unable to find proper work, has married a rich, old Indian woman twice his age and then murdered her to secure a timely inheritance. Bee, now working as a waitress but in truth the town whore, is planted by the police in the prison cell next to Art's to secure a confession from her former friend. In short order, she gains both his trust and the confession, assuring that Art will hang. The scene illustrates the way in which persons of Cherokee descent unable to juxtapose their ancestral beliefs with the new white establishment migrated to either crime or fringe-dwelling occupations in order to survive. Set in 1927, it also shows how in the twelve years since the characters were introduced as friends, the bonds of friendship and tribe were almost completely severed amongst the young. Gar, Audeal, and Viney are referenced by Art and Bee, but there has been no communication between them in years, as each has been struggling to find a way to survive in a new order. The scene further illustrates the way in which tribal allegiance is used against the Cherokee nation by the white establishment. The police know that Bee and Art grew up together and are both part-Cherokee. They waste no time in exploiting this part of Bee's past in an effort to gain their confession, knowing full well that her non-cooperation will drive her even further toward society's fringe. It is like proverbially kicking a dog when she is down and all the dog can do is thank the kicker for the attention.

Scene Three, set in 1931, is the chronologically latest scene in the play. Viney Jones Clepper has married a white farmer, Jack Clepper, now the town mayor, and come to gloat at her sister, Sarah, who has come upon hard times. Sarah has clung to the Cherokee traditions to her detriment: she is broke and widowed, her sons have sold off their land allotment to pay back bills, and her daughter, Maisie, aged 17, has had to marry a much older man to secure the family some stability. Rather than being empathetic, Viney is scornful. She has rejected her ancestry and all the Cherokee traditions, and it has made her wealthy and socially powerful. She refers to her former flame, Hutch from Scene One, as “That dumb Indian,” as if they were from different races, and goes on further to generalize all Cherokee through Hutch as “broody and sullen, he couldn’t seem to get a hold of himself, like a lot of part Indians around here” (*The Cherokee Night* 151). Though Art and Bee turned to crime to find a place for themselves in the new society, Riggs seems to indicate that the blind assimilation Viney embraces is much worse. If Bee is a “shuffling Tom,” put in the more relatable African-American context, then Viney is a “shuffling Tom” that doesn’t know she is one. She has put herself in the position of being a minority complicit with the majority and has sold out her past for comfort. Whether written by Riggs as Viney Jones in *The Cherokee Night*, Ossie Davis as Gitlow in *Purlie*, or August Wilson as Roosevelt Hicks in *Radio Golf* all three minority playwrights seems to concur that there is nothing worse than “a Negro [that] don’t know he’s [or she’s] a Negro” (A. Wilson 76).

Scene Four, set in 1906, features Art, Gar, and Hutch in a scene that could have been the inspiration for Stephen King’s short story “The Body,” better known as its film version, *Stand By Me*. In the scene, the three boys hike onto Claremore Mound in an effort to catch a glimpse of a dead black man allegedly killed in a card game gone horribly wrong. After whipping their selves into a conventionalized Indian ritual frenzy wherein they imagine killing the man themselves,

Art and Gar are compelled to drop to their knees and dig in the dirt, resulting in their hands being covered in blood. The boys flee the Mound as the silhouette of a black man appears from the brush.

This scene, more than the preceding three, is less about the story told and more about the ideologies of the young Cherokee children. On their journey, the three boys openly speak their prejudices against both blacks and other Indian tribes. Their ritual chant is the offensive, “‘F I seen a nigger, I’d hack him!” uttered over and over again (*The Cherokee Night* 164). They further assert that “Niggers’ll kill – and not keer! It don’t bother ‘em none!” (*The Cherokee Night* 162), and that black people can be shot but for some inexplicable reason not know it (*The Cherokee Night* 161). They speak of the Creek Indians as having intermarried with African-Americans and proudly exclaim that, “Us Cherokees wouldn’t do that” (*The Cherokee Night* 162). What Scene Four articulates best is the pride and prejudice of a people who are not fully aware of their decline. In 1906, the Cherokee youth typify a people who still define themselves by their own standards and hold other peoples and cultures wanting. Though the Cherokee prejudice is offensive, it illustrates by default the pride that the youngsters still feel at being a part of the Cherokee Nation. Within just a few short years that pride will be shattered as tribal bonds begin to be detrimental to the ever-increasing whites-plus melting pot that will be the Indian Territory. To cling to that pride and its preferred lifestyle will be to become a social pariah as Art, Gar and Hutch learn all too well.

Scene Five, perhaps the most surreally disturbing scene in the play, takes place in 1913 and tells the story of the cult of Jonas, an elderly white prophet that has set up a commune atop Claremore Mound of people believing themselves to be one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Raiding the town below at night and blaming it on the Indians, Jonas’s men capture Gar, who has been

drawn back to Claremore Mound in an effort to find himself and reacquaint himself with his ancestry. Jonas claims the mountain for Christianity, and when Gar refuses to convert Jonas has him chained up, certain to be framed and executed for the commune's crimes when the federal marshal en route investigates the night raids. The scene literally illustrates the white man's appropriation of sacred Cherokee ancestral land, but it also showcases the duplicity of the establishment to frame the Cherokee on an as-needed basis. It furthermore undercuts the Christian faith by displaying them as fanatics who have concocted a fantasy legacy as an excuse to further their land grab. Gar's refusal to submit to conversion makes him heroic in Riggs's eyes but little more than a small voice in the wilderness crying out to no one within earshot: a noble gesture that is too little and too late.

In the final internal scene, Scene Six, Hutch's ancestral allegiance is put to the test when his brother, George, shows up as if from nowhere to offer him land and a job. Hutch is living as a kept man off his girlfriend the Osage Indian, Kate Whiteturkey. Kate, like Viney and indeed like her Osage tribe, has embraced the dominant white culture and belief system, and it has made her rich. Hutch has everything he could want as her kept boyfriend, but his Cherokee pride has been stultified. Kate successfully drives George off their land at the end of the scene, but Hutch's faith in the rightness of his choices has been shaken. He sits stammering, "Wha-wha-what am I g-g-gonna do?" as the scene ends (*The Cherokee Night* 197). Riggs showcases Hutch in three scenes and draws attention to his speech affectation and its changes in each. In his earliest appearance Hutch has no stutter; he is secure in who he is as a Cherokee. In the picnic scene the stutter has developed, indicative that Hutch has lost touch with his ancestry and in so doing has lost his sense of self. In his final appearance Hutch starts out with no stutter; he has new principles rightly or wrongly that guide him. But when George introduces the question of re-embracing his

birthright, the stutter resurfaces. The stutter then is emblematic of Hutch's self-esteem, but its significance runs deeper than that. Hutch may not stutter in his life with Kate, but it is because he is not really using his voice; it is being controlled by another. The resurgence of Hutch's stutter indicates an awareness of his authentic voice breaking through. As witnesses we are led to believe that should Hutch choose the land of George's offering the stutter will cease and Hutch will begin speaking again with a voice he has not known since childhood.

There can be almost no doubt that Riggs identified himself more as a Cherokee than a white man, and more as an Oklahoman than a citizen of the United States. In both plays discussed in this section, white America is the aggressor, the interloper, the bearer of the inferior culture, while by contrast the Cherokee people and by extension native culture generally is considered superior, purer, and more deserving of at the very least a peaceful coexistence within their ancestral territory. Government officials are typified as pawns of a faceless white hegemony set on eradicating seminal culture and Christianity is a tool for charlatans to dupe lesser men with. Of the four broad categories discussed in this section: Women, Men, Minorities, and Cultural Allegiance, this final category is where Lynn Riggs poured his deepest and most personally held sentiments making his most profound judgments on the lands and peoples of the Indian Territory and of the whole United States.

CHAPTER THREE: PERSONAL SPECULATIONS

Having given a fairly comprehensive overview of Lynn Riggs's impressive career and highlights along with an examination of predominant themes and views in his work, it is now important to ask why this accomplished playwright, Pulitzer finalist, and Guggenheim scholarship winner is not better known today. My research led me to several conclusions regarding this matter, all of which are deserving of further scholarship. One, his sense of artistic integrity often made him intractable and uncompromising in the eyes of producers. Two, Riggs's subject matter was frequently viewed as colloquial by the New York intelligentsia and, as such, was not credited with universal appeal in the same way that his chief rival, the often Irish-themed Eugene O'Neill, was given a pass. Three, Riggs had a penchant for alienating his audience. Whether it was by appearing misogynistic, racist, socialist, or anti-American, most of Riggs's plays contain people, slang, or ideologies that the average theatregoers (i.e. a white couple) in the early twentieth century would find offensive. That there are not more records of walkouts and protests in opposition to his plays is surprising. Four, Riggs chose to include three-dimensional Native American personalities in his writing that were honest reflections of the white man's genocide that had been perpetrated on these peoples; this in a time when the viewing public was out of sync with such sympathies, preferring instead the more clichéd and jingoistic Cowboys versus Indians point of view. Five, several of Riggs's plays seem to indicate that the Indian Territory would have been better off as a separate country, and that those on the prairie bore no allegiance to the U.S. Government. Writing about America's supposed "heartland" between two world wars, this hardly could be a popular platform with the New York theatre community. Six, unlike many of his contemporaries, Riggs's writing style, due to his fragile ego and subsequent

egotistic over-compensation, never grew with his success and age. Seven, he at times was simply the victim of bad luck. Allow me to elaborate briefly on each of these.

“ARTISTIC INTEGRITY”

Both Charles Aughtry's and Eloise Wilson's doctoral dissertations make frequent reference to Riggs's concept of "artistic integrity." By this, they mutually report, Riggs believed that his words were perfect and sacrosanct, and that the playwright was unquestionably the apex of the artistic pyramid. There are numerous noted instances throughout his career where Riggs was asked to add, cut, or change passages of dialogue and he simply ardently refused, ultimately to the detriment or even demise of the production. The incident with the Schuberts discussed in my biographical summation was simply the most glaring and public example as it prevented *The Domino Parlor* (a genuinely well-written play) from securing its Broadway premiere. Had Riggs been more compromising, perhaps Lionel Barrymore's praise would have been prophetic rather than unfortunately ironic. After numerous instances of this kind, New York and Broadway producers simply stopped taking a chance on Riggs's work, knowing the kind of headache that they would have to endure. This in turn made Riggs bitter, and on more than one occasion he made disparaging remarks in the press about critics, about producers, and about his writing being his own. In the end, through this approach, Riggs became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“TOO COLLOQUIAL”

Of the twenty-four full-length plays that Riggs wrote, most take place on the Oklahoma prairie, Indian Territory, or in and around fictional or nonfictional versions of his hometown, Claremore. There are of course notable exceptions. *Russet Mantle* is set in Santa Fe on a fictional chicken ranch reminiscent of Witter Bynner’s homestead, *The Year of Pilár* is set in Mexico, and *More Sky* in Atlantis. Still, most of his work—his best work in fact—is modeled on what he knew as a child. Unfortunately for him, the New York theater-going community was more interested in the urban than the rural, in dock workers more than farmhands, in the Irish more than the mixed races of the prairies. Riggs wrote well of what he knew, but for the occasional cowboy curiosity, the average theatergoer simply was not interested and there was nothing he could do about it.

WHO SHALL I OFFEND NOW?

No one could say that Riggs had an easy life. His mother died and he gained a “wicked” stepmother, he had a strained relationship with his father, he allegedly lost the one true love of his life to another man. That Riggs was so comfortable exorcising his personal demons on the stage was both a strength and a weakness within his work. While his background gave him a fertile and passionate darkness from which to create, he wrote one female character after another with little redeeming value, never really choosing to create complex or sympathetic portrayals of his fallen women; they were oft times just bad. His white men were often criminal, blowhards, inept or, in the case of father figures, evil. The antipathy that he felt against his own father was so palpable that he killed him on stage twice, once using his actual name. In other instances he killed the father off before the play’s rise presumably just to have it done with. In the case of his stepmother, she became the template for Annie Marble in *The Cream in the Well*; a young girl “sleeping her way to the top” as a housekeeper, all the while harboring a dream of being a whore in a bordello.

Should a black man or woman venture out to see one of Riggs’s plays, they could take no pleasure in his prose. Many plays contain references to blacks as “niggers,” using them as punchlines to jokes, accusing them of savage behavior and violence, and in general treating them collectively as a prairie pestilence. Whether Riggs felt this way himself is unclear, however, his lack of African-American characters or of a single penned line in defense of the black man does little to his credit.

By comparison, his positive characterizations of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as more than gutter beggars or romantic Lotharios was probably similarly baffling to white audiences. Though Riggs does employ stereotypes in the portrayal of his working class

characters, he is never denigrating of Latinos as a whole and never resorts to any pejorative language or racial slurs against them in any of his plays. His General Aguirre is mentally superior to the white vacationers in *A World Elsewhere* with the exception of the central married female. No doubt this twist made the play less than popular with the white male majority that would have seen it.

Only Trino and Beto in *The Year of Pilár* could be considered homosexual creations of Riggs's; however, they are portrayed positively and not as jokes or punchlines, as was common in the cinema of the day. What was Riggs trying to say about this homosexual couple or of their lifestyle in general? Their portrayal must have puzzled theatregoers and frightened theatre producers.

“NATIVE AMERICANS?”

For Riggs, growing up in Indian Territory in the early twentieth century, and the product of a Cherokee mother, Native Americans were what he knew. However, for much of the rest of the country, Native Americans were Indians: partial-people best kept on reservations or shot in the talking pictures by well-intentioned white cowboys. What they were not were three-dimensional people with feelings and the full rights of American citizens. This put Riggs's writing in direct opposition to the sympathies of many of his patrons, who would not even think of swimming in the same pool with an Indian let alone empathizing with one. It would take several decades for the average American to appreciate what Riggs was attempting in *The Cherokee Night*, when over seven scenes he depicted the fall of an entire way of life at the hands of white hegemony. But even then, by the time America was ready to sympathize with minority cultures the focus was on African-American, then women, then Hispanic. To this day Native American civil rights is largely a non-issue, once again an illustration of Riggs's work being out of step with American interests.

TERRITORY FOLKS SHOULD STICK TOGETHER

How Riggs managed to get his plays produced in the jingoistic 1930s and 1940s, all the while suggesting that Oklahoma should have remained The Indian Territory, is something of a minor miracle. Ironically, in his biggest success, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, he does just that. One wonders if audience members actually understood the implications of Aunt Eller's taunting or were they instead so taken with the romanticized song-fest, simple love story, and array of colorful characters that inhabited the prairie that they missed the message. Whatever the reality, it seems clear that Riggs took exception to the changes that statehood wrought on the Territory and would have preferred the sovereignty of the territory to remain a localized matter. Little wonder that Oscar Hammerstein II felt the need to excise this bit of anti-American propaganda from *Oklahoma!* with a war raging, but those who did a close reading of the original could hardly miss Riggs's subversive sympathies and take exception.

FRAGILE EGO

It can honestly be argued that Riggs was a victim of his environment and that he never fully recovered. He lost his mother at two and gained a “wicked” stepmother that he felt the need to berate in several plays. He had no lasting relationship with his father, whom he claimed he hated in later life. His own community took no real interest in his career or works until he was dead. He claimed he only loved (a woman) once and lost. And there are rumors, unsubstantiated by my research, that he may have been a closeted and tormented homosexual. Phyllis Cole Braunlich in *Haunted by Home* puts forth this theory based on the circumstantial evidence that late in his life he was frequently in the company of young, handsome men who would periodically take up residence with him for a time (Braunlich xii)⁵. While the theory is not without merit, to date I have found no corroborating evidence by Riggs himself or other to say with certainty that this was the case.

Whatever the truth of the matter, what is certain is that Riggs was haunted by personal demons that he could not shake. He was given to bouts of depression, he migrated toward the ugly and violent in his writing (where he was most at home), and he was prone to hold grudges: against Juliette and William, against critics, and for a time against the New York theatre community. He saw little value in his own life, once remarking in the press that he did not like himself very much, and he was notoriously thin-skinned even amongst his friends. As a result, as his plays received less and less acclaim his work suffered; he wrote less and what he did write was not as promising as what had come before. In this instance, Riggs proved to be his own worst enemy.

⁵ Aughtry provides the circumstantial evidence for her theory, but writing in 1959 he chooses not to label Lynn a homosexual. Braunlich labels him as such late in his life, but provides very little supplementary evidence beyond recounting Aughtry. Wilson does not bring the subject up.

BAD LUCK

One needs only to look at the epilogues of both *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *Oklahoma!* to know that this is so. The two most important events of his professional career both were bookended with private heartbreak or public dismissal. What would his career have been had he been awarded the Pulitzer (either time), or been given due credit and attention in the press for *Oklahoma!*'s success? What if he had had sympathetic and loving parents, or better health? The speculation is as unending as it is pointless. The fact remains that Riggs did have bad luck when he needed a break the most and had any of the above turned out different, Riggs may have had a substantially different life.

CONCLUSION

Rollie Lynn Riggs, poet, playwright, and author is known today almost exclusively for the one play that he provided source material for, *Oklahoma!*, but did not actually write. This lapse in judgment on the part of posterity seems to have been the combined product of bad luck, bad timing with regards to subject matter and its accompanying sympathies, and a bad environment that created in Riggs high art but with it insurmountable demons that plagued him personally and affected him professionally throughout his career. To say that his output of twenty-four plays is almost unanimously unknown, with one third of which that have never been published, and another third of which are out of print with no easily secured performance rights, is an understatement, and this obscurity borders on the criminal. Of the four scholarly attempts made exclusively on the man, only one, Phyllis Cole Braunlich's *Haunted by Home*, published in 1988, is actually still in print for mass consumption. Two doctoral dissertations on his life that Braunlich used as her foundation were both written in the late 1950s, never published, and leave as many questions unanswered as answered. And Thomas Erhard's slim tome is more a primer than anything else. Riggs's life and voice were rich and unique: poetic Southwestern, troubled, violent, racist, colloquial, sweeping, and at times global and cosmopolitan. His contribution to American theatre was significant, and his dismissal a product of both the pre-civil rights era in which he flourished and his own personal undoing. There is much that is timely in his works, much that has never been said as deftly about Native Americans, pioneers, and prairie-folk as when he wrote it. One can only hope that as America culturally redefines and honors itself as a multi-cultural abstraction of the best in many, as opposed to a melting pot, it will take the time to look backward a hundred years and see again what it chose to turn a blind eye to before. In that climate, perhaps, the art of Lynn Riggs may be "rediscovered" as something fresh and new and

this troubled and forgotten soul may at last become at least a “bright golden haze on the meadow” of posterity. Of this, I feel confident, he rightfully and richly deserves.

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Vita

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