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“This Is My Texas”: Land Ownership and the Mythos of the American Southwest in Michael John LaChiusa’s *Giant* and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*

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While eating lunch in a hotel restaurant, novelist Edna Ferber received a phone call. After the concierge paged her, a man lounging face-down by the pool “uncoiled like a python.”¹ Recognizing the name of the writer who penned the novel *Giant* (1952), the enormous Texan leapt to his feet, drawling, “Who’s that he said? I’ll kill her! Where is she? I’ll kill her!”² While the Texan at the pool turned bashful and friendly when Ferber introduced herself, her portrait of Texas invoked what she described as a “blast of insult, vituperation, [and a] published scatological and libelous outpouring.”³ In her autobiography, she describes Texas newspapers that call for her to be “caught and hanged here in Texas” and “dropped through a sheet of glass below the scaffold so that she’ll be cut into hamburgers when she falls.”⁴ Critics compared her to Harriet Beecher Stowe, and not always favorably. The novel, which served as the basis for a 1956 film starring Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean and a 2012 musical by Michael John LaChiusa (both by the same title), critiqued the state’s violent history and origins, its treatment of displaced Mexican people, and the very notion of Texas pride and identity.

Ferber explains that she authored *Giant* because she believed that the novel’s “value lay in its exposure of racial prejudice against Mexican-Americans in Texas.”⁵ In 1954, Ferber wrote that its racial themes had become “more vital, more prevalent today in the United States than [...] when I began to write the novel.”⁶ She chose to focus on Texas because, “Arguably, Texas had more male mythmakers than any other western state.”⁷ By taking on Texan oil barons and consumerism, Ferber challenged the idealism ingrained in national mythology and the concept of Manifest Destiny. Her novel spans twenty-seven years in the life of Leslie Lynnton who impulsively leaves her father’s house in Virginia to marry conservative Texas cowboy Bick Benedict and moves, sight-unseen, to his family’s 1.5 million acre ranch. The novel takes place in 1952 and, via flashbacks, explores the racial history of Texas through the eyes of an outsider. Ferber’s *Giant* operated in its contemporary moment to challenge the stagnancy of traditions that continued to celebrate and uphold white supremacy at the expense of Othered native people. Ferber’s novel and the subsequent film adaptation reminded post-Depression audiences that ownership and consumption rested on a power structure that stood on the unpaid or poorly paid labor of subjugated native people. When Michael John LaChiusa teamed with book writer Sybille Pearson to create a musical adaptation of *Giant*, which saw its first workshop at Virginia’s Signature Theatre in 2009 and opened off-Broadway at the

Public in 2012, he confronted contemporary issues of white nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. Like Ferber's novel, LaChiusa's *Giant* criticizes the complacency, inertia, and outmoded traditions that maintain racist and discriminatory societal systems.

Structurally, *Giant* uses and distorts dramatic and musical conventions that became solidified and standardized during the American Golden Age of Musical Theatre to both confront and build upon Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943). As the starting point for the Golden Age, *Oklahoma!* "changed fashions in musicals for two decades."⁸ *Oklahoma!* did not directly address the social turmoil surrounding World War II, but it constructed an idyllic version of American national identity that confirmed patriotic pride and the essentialism of Manifest Destiny. Both musicals consider ownership of the land that is now the United States. But while *Oklahoma!* glosses over the original inhabitants, *Giant* brings oppressed native narratives to the forefront. Ben Brantley of the New York Times criticized *Giant* as a "long, crowded journey."⁹ Like Brantley, critics who panned the musical complained that it tried to cover too much territory, and that the text neglected the two main love stories in favor of a more panoramic effect. But the musical's expansive style communicates something much larger than love stories. *Oklahoma!* constructs a whitewashed version of national identity and Otherness through musical and structural innovations that became standard musical theatre conventions for several decades. *Giant* undermines the whitewashed revisionist histories that have continued to reverberate in popular musical theatre by using and subverting the conventions standardized in *Oklahoma!* to reinsert the oppressed Other into the narrative. For a 21st century audience, *Giant* destabilizes the certainties of borderlines, citizenship, and land ownership that *Oklahoma!* helps to solidify.

In their respective time periods, *Giant* and *Oklahoma!* addressed America during critical moments in which the country was redefining US national identity. Superficially, *Oklahoma!* appears to be a conventional love story in which Laurey, the young farm-girl ingénue, must choose between the dangerous farmhand Jud and her cowboy beau Curly. But as Tim Carter asserts, "It promised more than just the usual Broadway musical fare."¹⁰ According to choreographer Agnes De Mille, rows of uniformed soldiers watched that light, romantic comedy, "with the tears streaming down their cheeks because it symbolized home and what they were going to die for."¹¹ When *Oklahoma!* opened on Broadway just over a year after the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor and US entrance into World War II, it strove to ease tensions between isolationists, who believed that America had no place in a European war, and interventionists, who argued for fighting fascism overseas. A pervasive fear of Jewish refugees who might secretly be Nazi spies led to rampant anti-Semitism as the US State Department tightened restrictions on immigration. The United States was divided as to whether it should open itself up to include and aid the non-citizen Other or lock down American national identity and reject the non-American Other. *Oklahoma!* proposed a whitewashed unification of national identity, "redefining populism as an all-inclusive by melding [...] a soothing nostalgia for a bygone America with assimilationist, interventionist strategies."¹²

Oklahoma! erases Native Americans from the frontier narrative and presents the land as ahistoric.

LaChiusa's *Giant* also speaks to a nation at a watershed moment in terms of national identity in relation to immigrants and indigenous people. But rather than advocating for assimilation, *Giant* suggests a hybridized future of mixed but discrete cultures. The musical follows the rocky marriage of Bick and Leslie as they raise children and navigate their ineffable differences, but on a macro level it speaks to a society that asks once again: should the United States embrace non-citizens in need or reserve aid, land, and employment for citizens? Immigrants who manage to enter the country undetected often live in a liminal gray-space America in which they can find work, but cannot reap reasonable pay and benefits. In 2009, when the first iteration of *Giant* premiered in Arlington, Virginia at the Signature Theatre, NPR reported that although the numbers of Mexican people crossing the US/Mexico border illegally had decreased, the death toll of migrants while crossing had gone up. According to Reverend Robin Hoover, who founded Humane Borders (an organization devoted to reducing the number of people who die while crossing), "It's been a steady 200 bodies a year, despite the drop in illegal crossings."¹³ In 2017, thousands of Syrian refugees died when President Donald Trump, through xenophobic policies, refused their pleas for help. Trump's proposed immigration ban, promised wall between Mexico and the United States, and the resulting increase in white supremacist and neo-Nazi activities creates an even deeper need for change in US/American attitudes toward and perceptions of the people who have become the casualties of racist nationalism.

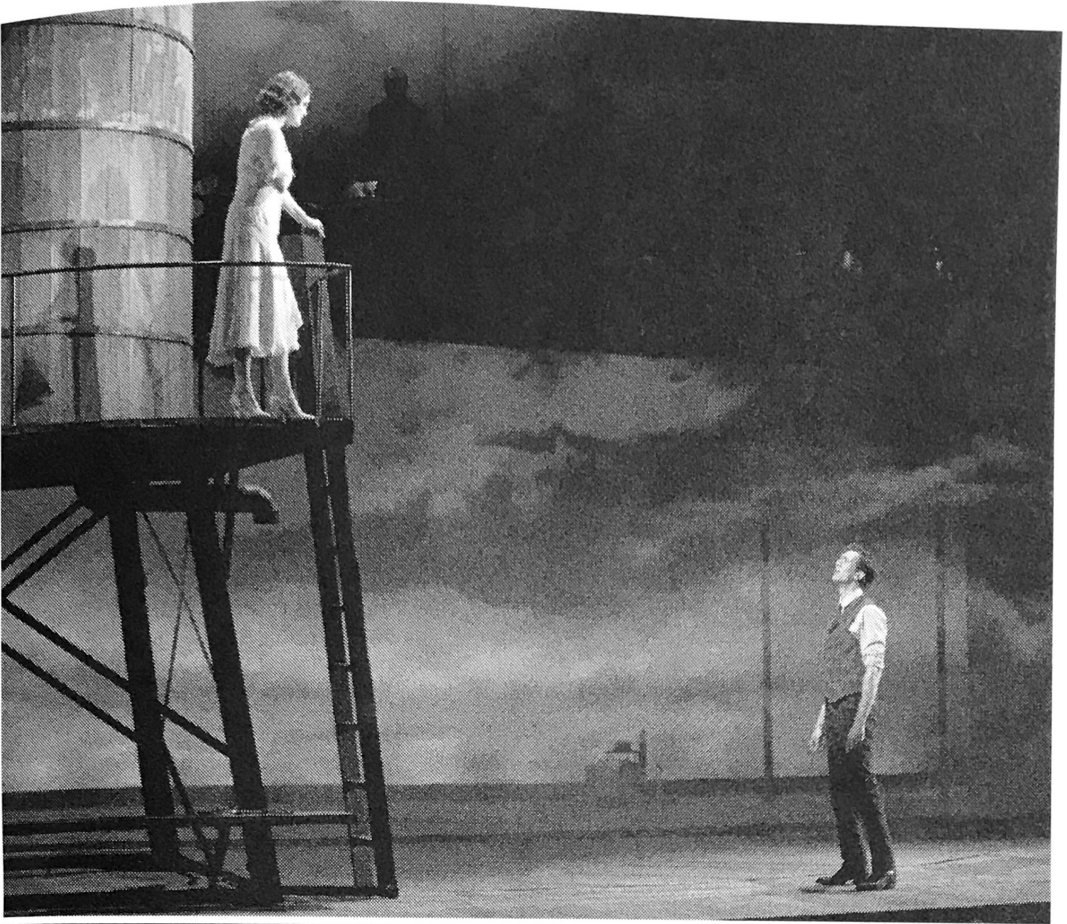
Both *Oklahoma!* and *Giant* situate the land as central to American identity. *Oklahoma!* depicts a rosy-colored vision of the American frontier and offered wartime audiences a dose of idealism. It shows America as a vast expanse of possibility. Tim Carter asserts, "New Yorkers may not have known much about the real Oklahoma, but surely they sensed in their hearts that this was a place that Americans could call home."¹⁴ Raymond Knapp cites "the role it played in providing America with a strongly embodied sense of a central national myth, [...] its 'frontier brinkmanship.'"¹⁵ *Oklahoma!* depicts "the transition from wilderness to civilization, from lawless to law-abiding, from frontier to community, from territory to state, from fledgling nation to world power."¹⁶ It presents a romanticized image of the land as a primal component of American patriotism and a basis for national unification. *Giant* reveals the land as an entity controlled by a racist and classist power structure. Only a decade after *Oklahoma!* premiered, Ferber's novel challenges the lingering wartime patriotism in the postwar era that *Oklahoma!* continued to reify during its long and repeated tenure on the Broadway stage. As a novel, a film, and a musical, *Giant* exposes the generations of cultural trauma from colonialism and subjugation beneath the surface of cheerfully nationalistic narratives of US history. *Giant* blurs the lines between Americans and Others in order to ask what home and land signify to the disenfranchised.

Visually, before *Giant* begins, the set creates a direct link to *Oklahoma!*. The land manifests literally in the sets for the original productions of both musicals.



Fig 1. Tommy Barnett (Curly) and Jillian Rutledge (Laurey) reproducing the original Broadway logo shot in the 2011 University of North Carolina School of the Arts recreation of the original 1943 production of *Oklahoma!*. Set replicated based on the design by Lemuel Ayers. Photo by Donald Dietz, used by permission.

Lemuel Ayers's famous backdrop for the 1943 Broadway production of *Oklahoma!* showed vast fields with a blue sky and persists as perhaps its most iconic image [Fig. 1]. For *Giant*'s premieres at the Signature Theatre in Virginia (2012), Dallas Theater Center in Texas (2012), and Off-Broadway at the Public (2012), Allen Moyer's similar backdrop of sky and clouds [Fig. 2] pays clear homage to *Oklahoma!*'s pastoral scene, portraying the seemingly endless stretches of land that symbolize the fruits of Manifest Destiny. *Oklahoma!*'s title song about "belong[ing] to the land" represents the vastness of the land musically as an anthem to western expansion and progress.¹⁷ The relentless forward motion of "Oklahoma" carries the song across a wide range of full scales and key changes. The refrain, "Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain," arrives at the end of a hope-filled run up the scale.¹⁸ The song shows the optimism of a unified community looking toward the future. In *Oklahoma!*, America is infinite. In *Giant*, however, land becomes a limited commodity reserved for wealthy white men. The Mexican vaqueros who work for the Benedict family express longing for the land that was stolen from them and their families. Even the squalid shanty town Benedict, home to the Mexican workers and their families, resides on Reata's massive sprawl of land. The land is also consumable. When the Benedict family ignores Bick's pleas and votes to take money from an oil company to drill on the ranch, this violation of the land manifests in oil rigs that mar the picturesque backdrop¹⁹ [Fig. 3]. *Giant*



Top: Fig. 2, Kate Baldwin (Leslie Lynnton Benedict) and Aaron Lazar (Bick Benedict).
Bottom: Fig. 3, Natalie Cortez (Juana Guerra) and Matt Doyle (Jordy Benedict).
Production photos from *Giant* at the Dallas Theater Center (2012). Set by Allen Moyer.
Photos by Karen Almond, used by permission.

questions the difference between property, a commodity, and land as synonymous with the spirit of state and nation.

At the beginning of Act I, *Giant* firmly situates the role of the Mexican people as inextricable from the history of the land by appropriating one of *Oklahoma!*'s most famous conventions: the solo singing cowboy. Curly begins "Oh What A Beautiful Mornin'," the opening number, "off-stage and without accompaniment."²⁰ *Giant* repurposes the solo singing cowboy while challenging typical representations that portray cowboys as exclusively white and ignore the complex construction of whiteness in a country of immigrants. The show opens to reveal El Polo, an old Mexican-American cowboy, tuning his guitar and then singing "Aurelia Dolores" in Spanish. The name translates literally as "Aurelia aches," and, in contrast to Curly's bright, carefree opening number, begins as a sorrowful lament in which El Polo refers to the land that was once his as a woman that was stolen by another man.

FUISTE LA TIERRA, AURELIA DOLORES

[You were the land, Aurelia Dolores]

LA TIERRA DE LA ANGUISTIA, ABSOLUTA

[The land of absolute heartbreak]

ENTONCES UN DÍA PERDÍ

[Then one day, I lost you]

UN NUEVO HOMBRE TER OBO LEJOS DE MÍ

[Another man stole you away from me]

¿NO SABE EL QUE NADIE TE PUEDE POSEER?

[Does he know that no one can possess you?]²¹

The melody sounds slow and mournful at first, and the opening measures of the song consist simply of Polo's voice which he accompanies with his guitar. But it picks up a hopeful uptempo as the chorus joins in "*con gusto*" (which, in Spanish, means "with pleasure") and the time signature changes from 3/4 to a quicker 3/8, musically depicting an optimistic forward motion.

Giant offers a complex portrait of Mexican-American life in Texas during the first half of the twentieth century. Polo's ballad moves from tragic to hopeful. When the Mexican-American chorus joins in the final verses of the song sound strong and triumphant in four-part harmony with a full orchestra. As the first moments of the show, "Aurelia Dolores" frames Polo and the Mexican-American chorus as rebellious and proud in the face of a consuming European American culture. Gloria Anzaldúa explains, "The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and for this, it is proudly defiant."²² She adds, however, that "Because the counterculture stems from a problem with authority – outer as well as inner – it's a step toward liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life."²³ The song "Aurelia Dolores" represents both the tragedy of the subjugated and a staunch refusal to allow Mexican culture to be crushed. As time progresses throughout the play, El Polo transitions from a proud vaquero to an old man with Alzheimer's who requires constant care by his family. When Bick's son Jordy comments that Polo,

who taught him how to rope, no longer knows him, Polo's granddaughter Juana replies, "I don't know what he knows any more. He walks to this tree every morning. He doesn't speak. He still sings. But only one song."²⁴ "Aurelia Dolores" becomes the last vestige of Polo's identity. When all of his memory and sense of self is stripped away, all he has is his connection to the land. He obsesses over the land he has lost and echoes the inscribed trauma from subjugation and violence.

In *Oklahoma!* the white cowboy operates antithetically to those who are Othered. Portrayals of white cowboy masculinity function as an essential part of mythicized western identity. Chris Blazina describes the frontier cowboy as "functioning as part of the wilderness they tried to tame."²⁵ *Oklahoma!*'s source material, *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Lynn Riggs (a part-Cherokee playwright) depicted a community made up of citizens with varying degrees of Cherokee blood. When Rodgers and Hammerstein adapted the musical, they "whitened and Americanized the characters."²⁶ By erasing the messy and unpleasant narrative of the Native Americans (and Oklahoma's bloody history of massacring them), *Oklahoma!* removes any doubt as to who belongs on the land. The cowboys who tame the frontier have presumably eradicated the invisible Others. Rodgers and Hammerstein bypassed the issue of racial conflict as an "endorsement of community over fragmentation" in an effort to heal divisiveness and promote unity.²⁷ *Oklahoma!* reifies the image of the white cowboy as the symbol of American masculinity and ultimately as the top of the social hierarchy in a predominantly white society.

Both *Oklahoma!* and *Giant* offer musical representations of the white cowboy expressing their presumed ownership of and power over the land and its inhabitants. But *Giant* shows the toxicity of white hypermasculinity as it divides Bick Benedict from his family. Bick introduces Reata, the enormous ranch that has been passed down through the Benedict family for many generations, to his bride Leslie with the song "Heartbreak Country." He lovingly refers to Reata as, "heartbreak country, hard and mean."²⁸ He begins the song by confessing to his new wife:

I DIDN'T TELL THE TRUTH, THE MOMENT THAT I MET YOU
THAT I HAD ANOTHER LOVE
I NEVER ASKED IF YOU COULD LOVE THE LAND WITH ME, TOO²⁹

Musically, the first three phrases imply tentativeness as if they are three false starts. The first phrase begins with an E and moves safely in one-step intervals before returning to E and then making a short jump up to an A. This jump creates a perfect fourth, an interval that is as stable and pleasing to the ear as the same note played in unison with itself or the same pitch played an octave apart. The second phrase repeats, but jumps up a perfect fifth (which has the same pleasing properties as a perfect fourth) before returning to the same A as the end of the last phrase. The third phrase repeats the first phrase, but the fourth phrase, "I never asked if you could love the land with me too," continues the upward motion that started and stopped in the first three phrases, even venturing a note outside of the key signature. His musical hesitation shows the depth and importance of his question, which represents the first

threat to their new marriage. To Bick, the land has become tantamount to the Benedict bloodline, ignoring the indigenous blood that fed the land first.

Bick describes his deep connection to the land by claiming its wild animal inhabitants as bodies that only a Benedict can tame. Although he does not list the Mexican workers who live and work on Reata, they are integral to the ranch so their inclusion is implied. Bick lists the thriving wildlife, finishing with, "The hawk will take care of itself, but only if we take care of the land."³⁰ The hawk, a potentially dangerous bird of prey, seems to live in deference to Bick's reign. In *Oklahoma!*, Curly serves as Bick's frontier-era analogue. He boasts a similarly simpatico relationship with the plants and animals, as he waxes poetic about growing corn, winking mavericks, and cattle who "are standing like statues" and accept him as part land by not "turn[ing] their heads as they see [him] ride by."³¹ *Oklahoma!*'s hawk "makes lazy circles in the sky" rather than posing a threat.³² In "Heartbreak Country," the score directs Bick to sing "rubato, colla voce."³³ "Rubato," which literally means "robbed time" in Italian, and "colla voce," which translates as "free voice." This tells the vocalist to sing freely to rigid accompaniment and steal beats from adjacent measures in order to stay with the orchestrations. Bick's vocal freedom and ability to steal musical beats represents his illusion of sovereignty within the massive borders of Reata which includes not only animal but human inhabitants such as the Mexican workers and his family.

Although Curly, as a cowboy, roams upon rather than owns the land, he still manages to proclaim his authority by possessing the space with both voice and presence as he begins "Oh What A Beautiful Mornin'" from behind the audience. He stakes his claim, and, symbolically, the claim of the white (or white-washed) cowboy upon the land.³⁴ Just Leslie becomes inextricably linked to Reata when she takes the Benedict name, Curly surveys the land that Laurey's family owns and that will presumably become his when he marries her. But unlike *Giant*, in which Bick's valorization of the land creates a growing divide between the cowboy and his family, the land in *Oklahoma!* promises to solidify Laurey and Curly's eventual union. Additionally, their marriage will likely provide heirs to inherit both bloodline and property. Since *Oklahoma!* omits Native Americans and slaves from the narrative, Curly's land remains pure and oppression-free. Like the beginning of "Heartbreak Country," the beginning of "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'" takes no musical risks. It's diatonic, which means that it stays neatly within the proscribed key signature. The melody has a similar forward, backward, then pushing forward momentum as the beginning of "Heartbreak Country." The number follows melodic conventions by moving up and down the scale through small intervals (which are easier for the brain to digest), strategically placed leaps, and a small peppering chromatic notes (notes outside of the song's key signature, which feel out-of-place but provide melodic variety) that always resolve quickly and neatly. The waltz tempo creates a "loping effect" that would match the gait of Curly's horse in the 1955 film.³⁵

The tune begins as Curly's solo love song to the land and morning on the frontier, but grows into a group sentiment. First, it becomes infectious when Laurey enters and reprises a verse. The ensemble brings it back in the middle of Act I. And

at the end of the show, the cast sings it as a finale. As Andrea Most explains, "The song's initially individualistic message is redefined when the number is reprised twice by a large portion of the ensemble in unison. [...] [T]he entire ensemble reprises the song 'lustily,' 'gaily,' and 'loudly,' according to the stage directions."³⁶ Its final line, "'Everythin's goin' my way' becomes a communal celebration of 'our way.'"³⁷ The growth of this song from solo to ensemble represents the land-based social unification that *Oklahoma!* proposes. Curly and Bick express white familial ownership over the land as essentialized. Their ability to connect with the land on an intimate level functions and originates as part of their white maleness, which extends to the ensemble through reprises of their songs. Consequently, those who are racialized as Other can only give their lives to the land as subordinates. *Oklahoma!* focuses Otherness neatly through two characters: Ali Hakim, a Persian peddler, and Jud Fry, a hired hand on Laurey and Eller's farm.

Otherness in *Oklahoma!* is racialized and marked by homelessness. As a traveling salesman, Hakim moves from town to town, never laying down roots. Fry works the land, but his uncontrollable anger and lust – Raymond Knapp describes him as "America's Id"³⁸ – has relegated him to the lonely, essentially uninhabitable smokehouse. Hakim assimilates by marrying Gertie (albeit at the end of a shotgun), whose irritating laugh makes her the least desirable of the farmers' daughters. By marrying the unmarriageable, he provides a service to the community rather than stealing a potential wife from a white farmer or cowboy. Marriage removes Hakim from the suitor pool as a potential threat to innocent white farm girls. It also allows Hakim to be inducted into a white family with a living white patriarch and to produce children who will maintain the family bloodline. But Jud Fry remains determined to steal Laurey, the female ingénue of the piece and thus the most marriageable, from the white cowboy in order to, presumably, defile her with his lustfulness. He refuses to accept his place in the social hierarchy, and thus dies unceremoniously after attacking Curly and Laurey on their wedding day. "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'" and the show's title song encapsulate *Oklahoma!*'s relationship among music, the land, and the Other. Only those who belong to the community can sing with the ensemble. Once Hakim has conformed, he too can sing "we know we belong to the land" with the rest of cast.

In *Oklahoma!*, there seems to be no shortage of land. The vast horizons in Lemuel Ayers's set seem to go on forever. In *Giant*, however, land is privilege that must be inherited. Angel Obregon, Jr., a US-born Mexican-American teen, attempts to connect to the land and American identity by spilling blood. Although most of the 3.5 million Mexican-Americans living in the United States in the 1940s were native-born US citizens, census data still listed them as Mexican, and "Mexican-American youth emerged from the hard times of the Great Depression and used their sense of patriotic sacrifice [...] to redefine themselves as men and women who expected fair treatment and impartial justice."³⁹ Angel enlists in the military, ready to fight for a land that is simultaneously home and not-home. When he dies overseas, heroically saving the lives of his fellow soldiers, his second-class status becomes apparent. He is denied access to land in the whites-only cemetery. Instead, his widow must travel

three hours to visit his grave and his non-white body, no longer able to participate as a worker on the ranch, is barred from internment and incorporation into the land.

Oklahoma! denies the inherent racism in US/American power structures by claiming that the responsibility for failing to “belong to the land” rests with the individual. The two Othered characters in *Oklahoma!* function as warnings. Stuart Hecht describes Broadway during the first half of the twentieth century as a “cultural Ellis Island” through which a rising number of Jewish and immigrant composers led the shows to “evolve into a sort of paradigm of instructional mechanism demonstrating methods for the integration of the new into their new nation.”⁴⁰ As one in a long line of coded Jewish characters during Broadway’s Golden Age of Musical Theatre, Hakim does double racial duty as a brown-skinned Persian. Although Fry was and traditionally is cast as white, the language in the script was lifted from the source material. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Lynn Riggs describes, Jeeter Fry, Jud’s counterpart, “as having ‘a curious earth-colored face and hairy hands.’”⁴¹ Subsequently, the musical’s script racializes him, if inadvertently. Jud bears the hypersexualization of both black male and “noble savage” stereotypes. Curly calls Jud “bullet-colored,” jokes about lynching, and uses the Negro spiritual call-and-response style in “Pore Jud is Daid.”⁴² As racial Others, Jud Fry and Ali Hakim become solvable problems either through naturalization into newly budding American national identity or violent death.

In *Giant*, the Mexican Other exists as a pervasive, visible, and messy part of the landscape. While *Oklahoma!* depicts its society without critique, Leslie functions as an outsider without the intense familial and emotional investment in the ranch. She observes and criticizes the racist power structures that keep Mexican people in poverty through lyrical variations of the phrase “Your Texas.” Leslie journeys from ignorance to frustration and a determination to fight for social justice. When Bick and Leslie meet for the first time in Virginia at her father’s house, Leslie sings “Your Texas,” about the adventure of a state she hasn’t experienced (or as Bick clarifies, “All [Texans] call their state their country.”⁴³). The song begins safely, or as the score directs, “gently, simply.”⁴⁴ In the first verse the melody, which repeats throughout the musical as Leslie’s theme, starts timidly and repetitively, barely straying out of a four-note range as she describes the average life she does not want. Then she sings:

DON’T LAUGH BUT I’D RATHER READ ROUSSEAU
AND EMERSON, CARLYLE, AND THOREAU
RIGHT HERE IN MY FATHER’S CHAIR I’VE READ
THE SORT OF IDEAS THAT CLOUD MY HEAD
WITH DAYDREAMS⁴⁵

On “and Thoreau,” she breaks out of the pattern by jumping up a fifth, and by the time she reaches “cloud my head with daydreams,” the melody has begun to rise. When she sings, “Your Texas. Now I don’t know your Texas,” the melody begins to sound wild and unpredictable. The tempo speeds up as she fantasizes about “the last

frontier"⁴⁶ until Bick joins to feed her fantasy. He melts her musical structure into his, which sounds like a melodic complement to "Hearbreak Country." In the end, she takes back the melody, reverting to the phrases from the beginning of the song about domestic life, which she cuts off with a quietly soaring "Not I."⁴⁷ The "Your Texas" theme returns when Leslie goes for a walk despite her new sister-in-law's exasperated warning that "People don't walk in Texas. Only Mexicans."⁴⁸ Lost in the intense dry heat, Leslie discovers the filthy living conditions of the Mexican workers in Benedict, the town owned by her new family. Disillusioned, she changes the lyrics, singing:

YOUR TEXAS
I'M SO LOST IN YOUR TEXAS
SOMEONE TELL ME WHAT I'VE DONE⁴⁹

The song darkly echoes her earlier song as the dream of massive land expanses becomes a reality.⁵⁰

Near the end of the first act, Bick and his fellow Texans seize the "Your Texas" theme with "This is My Texas," a rousing anthem to Texas state pride. Structurally, the song is reminiscent of *Oklahoma!*'s "The Farmer and the Cowman" in the playful back-and-forth with which each singer tops the last through a repetitively upbeat melody and rhythm. Both songs describe deep-seated land-based rivalries. "The Farmer and the Cowman" revises history to avoid addressing the slaughter of the Native Americans. Instead the song describes the friction between farmers and cowboys about how to best use the land in Oklahoma as the primary conflict on the frontier. "This is My Texas" includes the Mexican Other, but revises the history of the siege at the Alamo in order to frame them as the enemy. One farmhand describes the Mexicans as "the cruelest people history's ever known. For it was at the Alamo, ma'am, where man made the ultimate sacrifice."⁵¹ Bick calls the song "the first song we learned in school."⁵² In a score that largely contains complex integrated melodies, this song stands out in terms of melody and orchestrations as the most conventional. Musically, the square 4/4 time signature invites audience members to tap their toes. Like "The Farmer and the Cowman," the song follows a simple verse and repeating chorus structure. When "This is My Texas" reaches the bridge, the melodic line moves up the scale note-by-note, a familiar composing convention that recurs frequently in Richard Rodgers tunes. It appears in the title song of *Oklahoma!*, in *Carousel*'s "You'll Never Walk Alone," and *Babes in Arms*'s "Johnny One Note," as well as the majority of Rodgers' other scores. Of *Giant*, Ben Brantley comments, "I even heard several guys whistling the first-act curtain number in the men's room during intermission."⁵³

Although the songs function similarly out of context, *Giant* critiques its racist revisionist history. Bick's son Jordy interrupts, exclaiming, "The Mexicans didn't come here as immigrants. It was their land. We came as immigrants. We came for cheap land. When America went to war with Mexico, it was a land grab. [...] You don't say it's history when it's full of lies."⁵⁴ By criticizing his father, he also

criticizes an audience that became caught up show's first hummable melody and demonstrates show how easy it is to be lulled by an attractive yet oversimplified history. When Bick angrily sends Jordy away, Leslie responds with a new take on the "My Texas" theme, singing:

DAYS GONE, MONTHS GONE, YEARS GONE
IN YOUR TEXAS.
I DO NOT WANT YOUR TEXAS.⁵⁵

On the last "Texas," the key changes abruptly and the song sounds like a harsh parody of her earlier "Your Texas" as she sings:

I'LL NEVER LOVE YOUR TEXAS
I'LL NEVER LEARN TO SING ABOUT YOUR
LAND AND ALL YOUR VALUES
AND YOUR BIGOTRY AND NARROW MINDS
LYING TO YOURSELVES ABOUT YOUR TEXAS⁵⁶

Once again, on the last "Texas," the key changes, making the word sound even harsher and more unpleasant. The ever-changing phrase hits home the question: whose Texas is it?

Oklahoma! and *Giant* both situate the land as the central site of conflict that must be resolved to create an ideal society. Jill Dolan contends that "live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world."⁵⁷ *Oklahoma!* presents a homogenous utopia in which unity supersedes justice and the right of the oppressed to seek reparations from the privileged. It optimistically suggests that if the United States could start afresh like their frontier ancestors, and if outsiders would fully assimilate, violent histories would no longer matter. Conversely, *Giant* contends that a homogenous utopia is oppressive. Instead, the show argues that a "better world" lies in a hybrid community that remembers unpleasant histories, offers restitution to those who have suffered, and values distinct cultures equally as they mesh and diverge. When Jordy marries Juana, the play manifests this hybridity literally through the baby that the couple is expecting. Juana, who speaks both English and Spanish, represents what Anzaldúa calls *la mestiza*. Of *la mestiza*, Anzaldúa explains, "The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically."⁵⁸ Juana expresses her hope for a child who proudly says, "*Yo soy Mexicano. Yo soy Americano.*"⁵⁹ While the older generations hold on to separate cultures, Juana dreams of participating in both.

For his pregnant bride, Jordy reprises "Aurelia Dolores," which he has translated into English (finally revealing the meaning for a typical white upper-middle-class

English-speaking audience). Jordy points to a spot on the horizon where he has located the land called Aurelia Dolores which used to belong to her family. By sharing the land he will inherit with his Mexican-American wife and their impending mixed-race child, he returns the land that her grandfather has pined for. The musical asserts that the culture will be forever changed as the inevitable product of violent colonialism, but looks hopefully toward a future of comingling cultures. As Leslie pledges to shut down the all-white cemetery, Juana opens a school to teach Mexican-American children, and Jordy uses his medical degree to start a clinic for the poor residents of Benedict, *Giant* suggests that communality can only occur through recognition, verbalization, and correction of oppressive systems.

The 2016/2017 Dakota Pipeline controversy, in which Native Americans protested an oil conduit which would deface and threaten sacred land, demonstrates the relevance of the issues addressed by *Giant* and implied in *Oklahoma!* Current discrimination in borderland states raises questions of national identity and delineations of national lines as indicators of property rights. As Anzaldúa reminds us, "Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism."⁶⁰ *Giant* urges audiences to reconsider the implications of borderlines and the inherent problems with assuming that the words "America" and "American" are signifiers of an incontrovertible national identity. In 1954, Edna Ferber "hoped that one day Anglo oil millionaires like Bick Benedict [...], the originators and perpetrators of these inequalities in the economic and social hierarchies of America's new West, would be 'anachronisms like the dear old covered wagons and the California gold-rush boys.'"⁶¹ While these hopes remain unfulfilled as class and race hierarchies thrive, representing appropriation and destabilizing national identity can urge audiences to question inequality. By labelling "American" as a category rather than an identity – where we live rather than who we are – we can go beneath jingoism to acknowledge and make amends for the atrocities committed in the name of land ownership.

¹ Edna Ferber, *A Kind of Magic: An Autobiography* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2014), Kindle Loc 4385.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., Loc 2819.

⁴ Ferber, *Kind of Magic*, Loc 2868.

⁵ J.E. Smyth, *Edna Ferber's Hollywood: American Fictions of Gender, Race, and History* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010), 191.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁸ Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre: A Chronicle*, 3rd Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 588.

⁹ Ben Brantley, "A Texas Tale Too Big for a Lone Star," *The New York Times Online* (2012).

¹⁰ Tim Carter, *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical* (New Haven: Yale

University, 2007), 174.

¹¹ Agnes De Mille, Interview by Sylvia Fine. *Musical Comedy Tonight*, BlueGobo.com, 1979.

¹² Bruce Kirle, "Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in American Consciousness," *Theatre Journal* (55:2, 2003), 252.

¹³ Ted Robbins, "US-Mexico Border Crossing Grows More Dangerous," *All Things Considered* (2009), npr.org.

¹⁴ Carter, *Oklahoma!*, 189.

¹⁵ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 123.

¹⁶ Knapp, *National Identity*, 123.

¹⁷ Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!:* Vocal Score (New York: Williamson Music, 1943), 186.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹ LaChiusa, *Giant: Original Cast Recording*, "Act I Finale."

²⁰ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 3.

²¹ Michael John LaChiusa, *Giant: Original Cast Recording*, Brian D'Arcy James, Kate Baldwin, Raul Aranas, and Miguel Cervantes. 2013. *Giant: Original Cast Recording*. New York: Ghostlight Records, "Aurelia Delores."

²² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: aunt lute books, 2007), 100.

²³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.

²⁴ Sybille Pearson and Michael John LaChiusa, *Giant: Libretto/Vocal Book* (Los Angeles: Fiddleback Music Publishing, 2012), II-80.

²⁵ Chris Blazina, *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 49.

²⁶ Most, "We Know We Belong," 217.

²⁷ Kirle, "Reconciliation," 252.

²⁸ LaChiusa, *Giant: Original Cast Recording*, "Heartbreak Country."

²⁹ Michael John LaChiusa, *Giant: Piano/Vocal Score*, (Los Angeles: Fiddleback Music Publishing, 2012), 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

³¹ Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!:* Vocal Score, 19.

³² *Ibid.*, 186.

³³ LaChiusa, *Giant: Piano/Vocal Score*, 108.

³⁴ Hammerstein, Oscar, Richard Rodgers, and Lynn Riggs, *Oklahoma!:* A Musical Play (New York: Williamson Music), 1954, 2-3.

³⁵ Knapp, *National Identity*, 128.

³⁶ Most, "'We Know We Belong,'" 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁸ Knapp, *National Identity*, 127.

³⁹ Del Castillo, "Mexican-American Patriotism," 12.

⁴⁰ Stuart J. Hecht, *Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12.

⁴¹ Albert Borowitz, "'Pore Jud Is Daid': Violence and Lawlessness in the Plays of Lynn Riggs," *The Legal Studies Forum* (1:27, 2003), 179.

⁴² Most, "'We Know We Belong,'" 83.

⁴³ Pearson and LaChiusa, *Giant: Libretto/Vocal Book*, I-7.

⁴⁴ LaChiusa, *Giant: Piano/Vocal Score*, 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸ Pearson and LaChiusa, *Giant: Libretto/Vocal Book*, I-17.

⁴⁹ LaChiusa, *Giant: Piano/Vocal Score*, 43-44.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁵¹ LaChiusa, *Giant: Original Cast Recording*, "This Is My Texas."

⁵² LaChiusa, *Giant: Piano/Vocal Score*, 135.

⁵³ Brantley, "Texas Tale."

⁵⁴ LaChiusa, *Giant: Original Cast Recording*, "This Is My Texas."

⁵⁵ LaChiusa, *Giant: Piano/Vocal Score*, 149.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁵⁷ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005), 2.

⁵⁸ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 101.

⁵⁹ LaChiusa, *Giant: Original Cast Recording*, "There Is A Child."

⁶⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 34.

⁶¹ Smyth, *Edna Ferber's Hollywood*, 191.