The Complicity of Silence: Race and the Hamilton Holt/Corra Harris Friendship, 1899-1935

Jack C. Lane
Rollins College, jlane@rollins.edu

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"How can blacks get over slavery and discrimination when ghostly visions are etched upon our reality by words like those of Corra Harris which reach out from the grave to remind us of the pain and anguish our ancestors suffered at the hands of whites who refused to give up being slave masters?"

-John Burt Smith, Civil Rights Activist, 2009

The Complicity of Silence

RACE AND THE HAMILTON HOLT/CORRA HARRIS FRIENDSHIP, 1899-1935

By Jack C. Lane, Professor Emeritus, Rollins College

1.

Some years ago, while writing the centennial history of Rollins College, I came across an article written in 1924 by Hamilton Holt, former managing editor of The Independent magazine and soon to be President of Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. In a review of Corra Harris’s best selling autobiography, My Book and Heart, Holt had described how he “discovered” this celebrated Southern writer:

I shall never forget that May [1899] in going through the morning mail in pursuance of my duties as office editor of The Independent, I came upon an envelope whose striking staccato script at once arrested my attention. I opened it and proceeded to read the contents. I had not finished the first sentence when something, figuratively speaking, hit me between the eyes. Before I reached the last page, I was in the room of Dr. William Hayes Ward, the editor-in-chief, excitedly proclaiming the advent of a new and hitherto unknown author.

The article was a reply to one of Dr. Ward’s especially impassioned and indignant editorials on a Georgia lynching. Scores of such letters came in from Southern readers and as a rule they had to be consigned to the wastebasket. But this one was different. Although I was struck by its sincerity, simplicity, and charm, the three graces of literary art, it evoked my attention.

We printed the article. It made a national sensation. That led to a correspondence. We solicited more articles. They were published. More correspondence. We printed them. More sensation. The literary career of Corra Harris had begun. (1)

The letter sparked my interest. What was this “literary art” that Holt called “genius” and what was “the form and substance” of Harris’s reply to the Georgia lynching? After reading her article, entitled “A Southern Woman’s View,” published in the May 18, 1899 issue of The Independent, I too was impressed with her writing style, but unlike Holt, I was startled and disturbed by the article’s content. Harris had not just “replied” to Ward’s editorial. Employing racially charged language more often associated with the rantings of the KKK, she offered a passionate justification for the criminal Southern practice of lynching. Additionally, I was puzzled by Holt’s response to the letter. As managing editor of the nation’s most progressive magazine with a long reputation for championing African-American rights, how could Holt express such enthusiasm for Harris’s writing style while ignoring the letter’s racist content and damaging language? These questions bothered me, but because this subject was beyond the scope of my research, I set it aside with the thought of returning to it later on.

A recent experience refreshed my memory. While visiting my wife’s home in Cartersville, Georgia, just a few miles from where Corra Harris had lived, I read in a local newspaper that someone donating Harris’s homestead in Rydal, Georgia to Kennesaw State University. The university administration expressed great excitement over the possibility of using the homestead as a basis for educational research. Not everyone, I found, was so pleased with the decision. On a WordPress blog entitled “Can’t Hold My Tongue,” a writer strongly contested the university’s connection to Corra Harris. Harris “was a white supremacist,” the writer proclaimed. “Read her 1899 letter to the editor of The Independent defending lynching.” In 2009, the blogger continues, “whites don’t think, still don’t think, that white terrorism and the attempted genocide of Black southerners is a big deal.” The implications raised by Harris’s article and Hamilton Holt’s readiness to celebrate her literary qualities while turning a blind eye to her despicable racist editorial and the subsequent 30-year friendship, had resurfaced in my memory 20 years later, this time with a new perspective. The moral issue of the complicity of silence suggested by Holt’s indifferent response to Harris’s white supremacist writings and their 30-year friendship seems to me historically linked to the racial divide in this nation today and therefore worth exploring for the light their relationship might shed on that divisive issue. (2)

Harris’s letter had arrived on Holt’s desk at a time when The Independent was at the peak of its popularity and influence. Created by a group of Congregationalists in 1848 (one of the founders was Hamilton Holt’s grandfather, Henry Bowen), the weekly magazine had been a champion of African-Americans since before the Civil War, when it was a leading anti-slavery organ. After the war, the magazine had supported Radical Reconstruction in the South, and in subsequent years, under the editorship of William Hayes Ward, it had
consistently opposed the passage of Jim Crow laws in the Southern states. Many Northern journals called for accommodation, arguing that, given the social and economic problems facing the post-Civil War South, the North was pushing too hard. In words reminiscent of the Missouri Compromise, Ward responded: "We are learning patience to make concessions to the taste of prejudice. The right way to fight against it is vigorously and persistently and never yield an inch." (3)

"The rising number of lynchings in the South and the fact that voluptuously passionate denunciations from Ward. The lynching of African-Americans in Southern states had reached alarming numbers in the decades after the Civil War. By 1900, the practice had attained the status of ritual where a recurring pattern emerged: an African American male was accused of some crime (often of the rape of a white woman), the white community would express outrage, the victim would be arrested by local authorities, a mob would seize the victim from the authorities, a large crowd would gather to witness the execution, and then the victims would be publicly humiliated and frequently mutilated before being hanged or burned. Often, parts of his body were taken as souvenirs. Between 1880 and 1913, over two thousand African Americans were lynched in the former Confederate States. (4)

As a result of these incidents occurred on April 12, 1899 when an African-American named Sam Hose was accused of killing his white employer in Coweta County, Georgia. In the following days, rumor spread that he had also raped the employer's wife. On April 23, authorities arrested Hose and returned him to Newnan, Georgia, where the suspected killing had taken place. A mob met the train at Newnan, seized Hose, and announced that he would be hanged the following day. Special trains from Atlanta brought a large crowd of over two thousand witnesses to witness the spectacle. The mutilation of Hose was one of the most gruesome in the state's history. One of the newspaper reports spared no detail: "The Negro was deprived of his ears, fingers, and genital parts of his body. He pleaded pitifully for his life while the mutilation was going on. After he was hanged to death, before his body cooled, it was cut to pieces and the bones crushed into small bits. The Negro's heart was cut into small pieces as was his liver and sold for 25 cents. W. E. B. Du Bois, who was in Atlanta at the time, was sickened by the news that Hose's knuckles were advertised for sale at a local grocery store. No one was ever accused or arrested for participating in the lynching. (5)

The Northern press's unswerving criticism of the lynching, and especially Ward's editorials and Steward's article, were the catalysts that prompted Corra Harris to write her impassioned rebuttal letter. Little in Harris's background suggests why this young Southern preacher's wife would enter into a debate over lynching with one of the nation's most literate magazines. Born in 1889 in Elbert County, Georgia, until her teenage years Harris lived a typically sheltered rural life. In 1897, at the age of 16, she married Lundy Harris, a Methodist circuit rider who travelled to rural churches throughout northern Georgia. Two years later, Lundy was appointed adjunct professor of Greek at Emory College in Oxford, Georgia. Though deeply religious, he was driven by theological doubts and plagued by depression and alcoholism. In 1898, he lost his position at Emory, forcing the family into economic destitution. At the time Corra Harris wrote the letter to The Independent, they were living in Rockmart, Georgia, where Lundy was teaching at a private school. (8)

Corra Harris's letter deserves extensive quotation because no summary could do justice to her literary talent, nor could a few passages adequately reveal the depth of her racial prejudice. In the South, Harris declared, The Independent magazine was regarded as "an advocate of extreme Northern views" on the issue of race relations. Southerners read it, she said, "in order to get a perspective of our methods from an alien point of view." She was writing not to condone "the atrocious conduct of the lynching mob, but to explain its savage fury." (7)

Today in the South every white woman lives next door to a savage brute who grows more intelligent and more inhuman in his cruelty every year, against whom the dilatory [sic] laws of Georgia and other Southern states offer no protection. In this section of Georgia, which is not far from Pulaski, no white girl, however young, or woman, however old, would be safe alone on the public highway. The farmers do not dare leave their wives and daughters at home while they are in the fields. The country schools are failures because parents will not risk their girls along lonely settlement roads. Even in small towns the husband cannot venture to leave his wife alone for an hour. At no time, in no place, is the white woman safe from the insults and assaults of these creatures. The negro brute is a product. The circumstances which bring him into existence are worth considering. He is nearly always a mulatto, or having enough white blood in him to replace native humility and submission with Caucasian audacity. He is sure to be a bastard, and probably the offspring of a bastard mother. Can such a creature be morally responsible? His lust is a legacy multiplied by generations of brutal ancestors. This is the genesis of the brute. You cannot judge those people sitting on a dais in New York, looking at them through stained-glass windows of poetic sentimentality. You must live among them long enough to learn that they can in quantum dipped imitate the highest ideals with the humdrum of their actual existence. The negro is the mongrel of civilization. He has married its vices and he is incapable of imitating its virtues." -Corra Harris

Corra Harris outside the Kappa Alpha fraternity house in the February of 1931 with Rollins students.
When such racial prejudice is so embedded in the American psyche, we should not be surprised to see it resurging, even though language may obscure it.

You paper? I hear this in the case, the millenium (sic). You go in and sit down at your Cosmopolitan Club with Negroes with the nobliest of motives. You want to keep them from feeling so bad and socially neglected. O Lord! You lay the Christians in the shade with the perfect spirit of your good will which is the best charity in the world. And what was the result? You walked too near the edge... Observe the Negro at your dinner. That was one company where the roggers showed the most logical sense of the situation. They believe in intermarriage and they regarded the opportunity to dine with you disingenuously white as a step forward in that direction. And if you represent the sentiments of this country by your presence then they would have been right.

I recall very distinctly the fate of a mild-mannered Republican gentleman who entertained the same Christian spirit you have so recently championed. They believed the niggers showed the most logical sense of the situation. They believe in intermarriage and they regarded the opportunity to dine with you disingenuously white as a step forward in that direction. And if you represent the sentiments of this country by your presence then they would have been right. (2)

The account of the white women present at your particular dinner. (How could you countenance that revolting sight?) I cannot imagine any scene more degenerative as that where a white woman sits with a Negro man in social contact with me. I could never believe such a white woman was not mortified and revolting, as if she had been guilty of one of the most indelent crimes. I should like to have every white woman who degraded all white women when she sat so near to her black man companion at your dinner fined and imprisoned. (12)

Twenty-five years after The Independent printed her articles, when she had an opportunity in her autobiography to reconsider her views on race, she made no concession. She still placed the responsibility for the lynchimg on the perceived bestiality of black males, and on northern "idealists" who led them to believe they were equal to whites. The lynching, she wrote,... was one of those crimes we have been driven to commit from time to time by way of countering the teachings of Northern sentimentalists which has had regrettable influence upon the Negro race... It is now bearing being settled by a strange retribution. Those apologists of purely emotional idealism are reapinng what they have sown. (10)

The preachers and press of the North were horrified as usual (over the Hose lynching). William Hayes Ward wrote a masterful editorial about it. In fact, he was so enraged by the act beacuse behind the facts. (My) letter was an explanation of the lynching, placing the responsibility where it belonged so clearly that it amounted to an indictment. Judging by the furor it created, I must have hit the nail on the head with considerable force. (13)

Throughout these years Harris had never considered that the segregation laws and the white obsession with white supremacy had in any way contributed to the violent race relations in the South. In her perspective, the sole cause of the race problem was African-American behavior and Northern interference, a litany that went on to reverberate throughout the twentieth century. This attitude allowed her (and white southerners) to deny any responsibility for that violence.

Holt's enthusiastic response to Harris's illiberal, not to say bigot­
ed, racial attitudes seems puzzling, because it was completely at odds with his background and the progressive policies of The Independent. Holt's father was a man of tolerant, liberal democratic views who had great influence on his son. At Yale and Columbia Law School, Holt's professors reinforced his evolving liberalism. William Hayes Ward, who served as a mentor, further shaped Holt's progressive beliefs. Although he deferred to Ward as The Independent's chief advocate on race relations, he fully supported the magazine's championing of African-American rights. In 1900, Holt wrote, "equate an active participant in the Cosmpolitan Club, a racially mixed effort to improve race relations in New York City. Holt often attended the famous annual conferences called by Booker T. Washington that he was willing to ignore the racist content of her articles and letters? Why was he so obsessed with the belief that he was the "discoverer" of a budding genius that he seemed oblivious to what Harris was saying? Holt left no record of an answer to these questions, but his behavior toward the Negro...
Harris allows us to infer an answer. When The Independent's literary editor retired in December, 1900, Holt asked Harris to review a popular novel that was "enjoying a sensational run." The article, Holt later wrote, received "more comments than any review we ever published." During the next decade, Harris reviewed scores of books and wrote several articles and a short story for The Independent. In the meantime, Harris had achieved national fame as a best-selling novelist and essayist, Holt had become owner and chief editor of The Independent, and they had developed a close professional relationship. When Holt became President of Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida in 1925, one of his first acts was to invite Harris to his home. Holt wrote her: "What a good woman and what a great woman you have become since the days so long ago when you first began to write and I first began to edit." In response, she wrote: "I send you my grateful love for having produced me and my admiration for being one of the greatest, kindest men I have ever known." At his presidential inauguration, he awarded her an honorary degree. In the presentation, Holt stated that Harris was a "noble-minded author of noble-minded books" who had brought "courage and composure to thousands of unknown friends." Over the next decade, she developed a close personal relationship with Holt and his family, including Holt's wife, Zenie, who apparently shared Harris's racial views. Harris often visited the President's home in Winter Park, spoke at Rollins several times, and in 1930 offered a short course at the college. After Harris's death, when her family built a memorial chapel over her grave at In the Valley homestead, Holt delivered the dedication speech, praising Harris's literary career and their long friendship. In all this time, Holt never expressed, neither in private correspondence nor in public communication, a concern about Harris's racial attitudes.35

Since he never criticized Harris, Holt's response to Harris's racial views Harris expressed in her early articles and in those letters written to him, Holt left the impression that style mitigated objectionable content. However, malicious, hateful views argued by "geniuses" with sincere and charming writing styles are far more dangerous than those who use simplistic, coarse language. Holt said he committed the latter to the trash basket; then why, as in the case of Harris, did he publish the former? Although William Hayes Ward made every effort in his editorials to refute Harris's arguments, Holt seemed unfazed by these damaging criticisms. He never questioned, for instance, how a white woman, who had made it a point of avoiding all contact with these male "vile creatures," could have such an insight into their behavior. Why, for example, did not Holt consider the question that one of Harris's readers posed to her: How could a white woman have such an insight into African-American culture? When such racial prejudices are so embedded in the American psyche, we should not be surprised to see it resurfacing, even though language may obscure it. Given the historical racial context suggested by this essay, where even progressives such as Hamilton Holt reacted so tepidly to the racism of his generation, we also should not be surprised when African-Americans respond sensitively to the subtlety of coded language that has racial overtones. We can see that an insidious racial thread has been running seamlessly through the American fabric from the lynching of Sam Hose (and before) to the killing of Trayvon Martin. When we remain silent about this fact, we, too, become complicit. In the same issue of The Independent where Harris justified lynching and segregation with passionate, interlaced language, the brilliant African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, in an article entitled alongside Harris's, presented a measured discourse and a rational, historically grounded explanation for the deterioration of race relations in the South, suggesting a way out of this racial impasse:

A drawing of the color line...which leaves no common ground of meeting, no medium of communication, no sympathy between the races whose interests are at stake—the sooner such conferences can take place all over the South, the sooner such conferences can take place all over the South, the sooner the lynching law will disappear and crime be abolished.36

Substitute "race" for the "South" and "racism" for "lynching" and we can see that Du Bois could be speaking to our present condition. We would do well to resist the polemics of the "white" Harris, his rhetoric and the superficial arguments that seek to hide her (and the white Southern) contempt for African-American culture. When such racial prejudice is expressed and written as if it were innocent, hurtful views argued by "geniuses" with sincere and charming writing styles in the most dangerous way possible—hidden within the American psyche, we should not be surprised to see it resurfacing, even though language may obscure it. Given the historical context of lynching as suggested by this essay, where even progressives such as Hamilton Holt responded sensitively to the subtlety of coded language that has racial overtones, we can see that an insidious racial thread has been running seamlessly through the American fabric from the lynching of Sam Hose (and before) to the killing of Trayvon Martin. When we remain silent about this fact, we, too, become complicit.

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S. After his capture, Hose implicated a Reverend Elijah Strick.

4. The literature on lynching in the South is extensive. The scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and

127. The news of the Sam Hose lynching and the exhibition scrolls, and poetry. As editor of

anti-lynching song written by a Jewish school teacher named

1913. During this time, he became a leading scholar in

Black-Seminary, he served as a pastor in Kansas, as professor of

Educator. Gainesville: University of Florida

"Negro

The Crucible of Race:

Address: "Lynching, the Extermination of Black Mankind," September 15, 1913. During this time, he became a leading scholar in

the New South by Catherine Oglesby. Gainesville: University of Florida

The Independent, February 15, 1899. According to one scholar, the myth of the black male as sexual predator was central to justifying segregation as well as lynching. "The sexual assault of a white woman by a black man is seen as a violation of the purity of the family life had been so nearly destroyed...that such a people in a single generation be able to posit to so many pure hues, so many low abiding citizens." "The Negro and Crime," The Independent, February 15, 1899. In May, 1899, The Independent published an article entitled "Lynching, the Excruciate For," by Ida B. Wells, the nation's leading lynching advocate. The article was a direct rebuttal of Harris's letter. The claim, Wells wrote, that "lynchings are the desperate efforts of the Southern black race to rid themselves of their blackness must be pitted as well as condemned. A careful classification of lynching shows that contempt for the law and racial prejudice constitute the real cause of lynchings. "The Independent, May, 1899, 1133-1136.

17. To Harris, Holt, June 29, 1899. Holt Parke, Talmadge, Harris, the Independent, October 26, 1899.


19. Corra Harris, My Book and Heart. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1924, 181-182. Along with The Circuit Rider's Wife and Recording Angel, Harris's autobiography was a best seller. Along with her work on the Ku Klux Klan, for over forty articles for The Independent and several articles for Ladies Home Journal and The Saturday Evening Post. Between 1900 and 1935, she was one America's most popular writers and lecturers. During the last twenty years of her work, she wrote twenty works of fiction, over fifty articles for

20. "no more interpret the mob mind in America than he


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30. "The facts do not exist; they are created by the press. "Idem, October 4, 1906; Harris to Holt, October 10, 1906. HPapers.