

The Meaning of the Midwest

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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States Midwest stood poised to lead the nation economically, politically, and ideologically. Its literary productions of this time open upon a landscape of seemingly endless possibilities and expansive futures. My project studies the ideological constitution of these possibilities, finding that they arise from the condition of unprecedented secularity which marked early twentieth-century U.S. modernity. I employ Charles Taylor's definition of secularization as the shift to belief as possibility rather than assumption, in which new options for belief or unbelief expand like a spiritual nova. This definition makes visible in Midwest texts the different attempts protagonists make to achieve authenticity in a secular age that offers new options for living meaningfully. Like windows onto a figurative landscape, different texts reveal unique vantages as well as startling parallels. I examine the following text grouping, which underscores the heterogeneity of the Midwest: O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, and Black Elk and John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*. As rural texts, they collaboratively depict the rural Midwest as a region that is both heartland and subaltern, at once the center of the nation but also estranged from supposed loci of modernity. I argue that their peculiar searches for authenticity offer insight on modern selfhood in a secular age, which constitutes the meaning of the Midwest then and now.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The 2013 Paramount film *Nebraska* depicts the Midwest as a repository of futures from the past. Woody Grant sets out on a journey to his home state to claim a sweepstakes prize. Although his son David warns him of the scam, Woody maintains staunch faith in the prize money. Showing signs of dementia, the feeble and aged protagonist intends to mobilize the future he has imagined since his youth: He wants an air compressor and a truck. These items function as symbols more than stereotypes: As Woody travels the stretches of Nebraska, his unwavering belief that sturdiness and mobility await him demonstrates faith in the Midwest as a land of the future. For Woody, anything is possible in Nebraska. Trucks and compressors symbolize this possibility as objects but also as functions. Not simply potential acquisitions, they also make things possible, particularly in the realm of mobility and autonomy, since Woody can go where he wants on his own once he has them. In reality, the black-and-white film implies, the land of possibility is a relic of the past. Woody moves through small towns of elderly populations, dilapidated economy, and vacant buildings only to hear the inevitable truth that the prize is a scam. This progression, experienced through Woody's interaction with his son along the journey, makes a historical point about the Midwest. At one point a frustrated David confronts his father, "You can't drive. What's the point? Why do you need a truck so bad?" "It's for you boys. I wanted to leave you something," Woody responds. When Woody finally admits the prize is a scam, David purchases a truck in his father's name and, once in Woody's hometown, gives him the wheel. This acquiescence, which both appreciates and condescends to Woody's desire, extends the same larger gesture toward the Midwest's glorious future of its past. As the closing scene fades,

Woody drives down a gravel road ribboning through a grayscale expanse, the air compressor sitting composedly in the truck bed. He parks, and David takes the wheel: Dreams of the past duly commemorated, reality resumes.

This project examines the historical moment when the Midwest actually did gaze on seemingly limitless futures of possibility.¹ Jon Lauck narrates how the region was influentially poised in the early 1900s not just materially, as Woody's truck and compressor typify, but also ideologically: "When the twentieth century dawned, the American Midwest stood tall as the republic's ascendant and triumphant region—economically prosperous, politically formidable, culturally proud, and consciously regional" (11). That is, at the turn of the century the Midwest bore the reputation of being modern, which gave it cultural influence in the eyes of the nation. The OED defines the term "heartland" as the inner part of a country "when regarded as important or powerful," and the region's acquisition of that label in this period signals such influence. Closely affiliated with the region's sense of power was its heritage of the frontier, made famous by tributes like Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Frontier in American History." The Turnerian version of Midwest history portrayed it as a land where anything was possible for the self-made man, a faith that Woody inherits. Regional depictions from Turner to *Nebraska* attribute this possibility to the Midwest's physical landscapes, which invite expansive undertakings. But as *Nebraska* endeavors to show, this faith proved temporary; the Midwest is no longer considered a landscape of modern potential. Lauck recounts the ideological "revolt from the village" that successfully reinterpreted the region as anti-modern rather than ascendant, aided by factors including post-war urbanization, new farm policies, mass entertainment, and nationalization of politics (11-

35, 52-67). By the Cold War the region had assumed a reputation of cultural poverty associated with traditionalism and resistance to modernity, a shift reflected in the second definition the OED provides for “heartland”—the Midwest of the United States, “especially regarded as representing traditional social attitudes and moderately conservative politics.” This two-part definition—powerful on the one hand and backward on the other—captures the bright, brief futures of the Midwest’s past. Yet although the Midwest’s moment has apparently passed, its enduring reputation as the heartland of the nation belies an ongoing presence which indicates that the possibilities of the region persist.

The frontier of possibilities which Woody sees in Nebraska is only one aspect of the region’s figurative landscape. Philip Deloria, writing about the same era Lauck calls the Midwest’s golden age, posits a different kind of frontier. In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Deloria suggests that the early twentieth century opened a window of possibility for new kinds of Native-white relations (225-26). Shifts in “expectations and actions” of whites created a moment of “paradox and opportunity” such that “it seemed as if Indians and non-Indians might be able to challenge the old script and maybe even write a new one.” As an example, he considers a photo of Red Cloud Woman sitting underneath a hair dryer in a salon (238-40). While I discuss this image and idea more later, pondering Red Cloud Woman alongside Woody Grant demonstrates the complexity of the Midwest landscape, which offers multiple frontiers of possibility. Deloria states that the window of possibility for new native-white relations in the early twentieth century swung shut again, but that its largely forgotten moments “are worth our continued reflection” for their insight into the current century. His metaphor of window provides useful language

for describing the Midwest's past futures, which I desire to extend to my project. This project looks through different windows—such as Woody Grant's or Red Cloud Woman's—upon the historical landscape of the Midwest for unexpected and worthwhile insights.

While different windows offer different vantages of the Midwest, I posit that the landscape as a whole features a common quality which inspires this project. Different as Woody's and Red Cloud Woman's windows are, they both improbably suggest that anything might happen in the Midwest, from sweepstakes to salons. This quality of possibility defines the Midwest in the early twentieth century and renders it meaningful for modernity—specifically, the possibilities for new kinds of belief, which become conceivable in a secular age. In the early twentieth century, the Midwest underwent an ideological wrestling on behalf of the nation which centered on secularity as a modern condition. To examine this historical moment I define modern secularity in this project by employing several key concepts from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. First, secularity is belief as possibility; that is, the condition in which belief (a term roughly equating religious faith) is still conceivable but no longer culturally assumed. Not merely the decline of religion in institutions or private practice, secularity is more deeply a shift away from belief as a given to belief as one possibility among many others, and, moreover, an increasingly unlikely possibility—"a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (3). Second, the shift to belief as possibility opens up different explorations for human fulfillment; that is, living authentically or meaningfully. Whereas a belief-based society assumes God is the

ultimate source of fulfillment, a secular society opens up as many possibilities for living authentically as it does options of belief and unbelief. In other words, broadening possibilities for belief and unbelief allows “a viable conception of our highest spiritual and moral aspirations [to] arise such that we could conceive of doing without God in acknowledging and pursuing them” (234). Tracing this gradual shift toward secularity in the West over the period 1500-2000, Taylor marks the rise of modern selfhood or the “buffered self,” which is able to conceive of aspiration with or without God by developing fixed boundaries between itself as an individual and the rest of the cosmos (37-42). The ensuing milieu of options, both for belief or unbelief and for subsequent pursuits of aspiration, generates what Taylor terms a “nova effect,” in which the possibilities of belief or unbelief and of fulfillment ever widen (300-02). This process—the shift toward belief as possibility along with the rise of modern selfhood and the ensuing nova effect—defines the landscape of modernity.

While I will explain my application of Taylor’s concepts to the twentieth-century Midwest in a moment, two quotations from Willa Cather’s *Shadows on the Rock* illustrate the shift to secularity and its accompanying options for fulfillment. Although Cather set her most famous novels in the modern Midwest, *Shadows on the Rock* describes the security of Catholic nuns in the unsettling landscape of seventeenth-century Quebec. By dwelling on the nuns’ assumption of security, Cather implicitly comments on modern secularity as comparatively uncertain: “They [the nuns] were still in their accustomed place in the world of the mind (which for each of us is the only world), and they had the same well-ordered universe about them...in this safe, lovingly arranged and ordered universe (not too vast, though nobly spacious), the drama of man went on at Quebec just

as at home, and the Sisters played their accustomed part in it” (97). For the modern person, the assumption of belief and the safely ordered and meaningful life belief engenders is no longer a given. Cather’s nuns, secure in their landscape of assumed belief, convey by opposition the landscape of secularity. But a second passage shows how secular people recycle belief phenomena into new forms of fulfillment. When a recluse nun experiences a miracle on a frigid midnight, Cather reinterprets the phenomenon to lend it broader meaning: “The people have loved miracles for so many hundred years, not as proof or evidence, but because they are the actual flowering of desire...From being a shapeless longing, it becomes a beautiful image...and the experience of a moment, which might have been a lost ecstasy, is made an actual possession and can be bequeathed to another” (137). This aside invites modern secular readers, whatever their own worldviews, to understand the significance of miracle not as limited to a particular belief system but as meaningful for its universal expression of human desire. The passage exemplifies what Taylor describes, a viable conception of authentic spiritual aspiration in which God is not essential. Cather can inspire readers in 1931 with the miracle of a seventeenth-century recluse not because she or they assume belief but because the frontiers of fulfillment have expanded.

Like Woody or Red Cloud Woman, Cather’s treatment of miracles offers another window into how modern people seek fulfillment with or without God in a secular age, which is essentially the question this project asks of the Midwest. I posit that the secular search for fulfillment defines the landscape of Midwest modernity; moreover, that the Midwest grappled with the possibilities of secularity with an intensity and scope unique to the region and significant for the nation. In short, I argue that the meaning of the

Midwest, both historically and presently, is the sum of these possibilities and the ways people pursued them. By making this argument I take up the challenge posed by historians like Lauck and Deloria to reconsider the region's relevance, but to define its meaning in terms of secularity is a new endeavor. In making this specific claim, I draw inspiration from the pattern of James Coleman, whom I cite in my chapter on African American homesteading. Coleman considers the quality of belief to be the most ignored but prevalent feature of African American literature (1); I similarly consider the understudied prevalence of belief matters in Midwest texts as definitive of its modernity. While modernity in the U.S. is defined in many ways not limited to secularity, the abundance of belief (or unbelief) in Midwest narratives justifies an examination of the region's modernity in terms of secularity and yields insights into continued exploration of secular authenticity.

This project examines rural texts. Although the rural Midwest may seem antithetical to modernity, I draw upon Mark Storey's thesis that we gain new understandings of modernity through "geographical estrangement" (2). That is, approaching modern notions "from places and positions that appear most distant from them" produces new perspectives, similar to how Deloria narrates the "secret history" of Native modernity. Taking seriously Storey's critique—that literary criticism marginalizes the rural in its conception of modernity—I imagine rural texts' insight into modern problems as windows one must crane to see through but are worth the view. In rural texts, landscapes have heightened potential to affect themes, and this regionalist project assumes the importance of physical landscapes upon figurative. Eudora Welty calls place the "ground conductor" of a text's themes and credits Yorkshire and

Mississippi, for example, with inspiring *Wuthering Heights* and *Sound and the Fury* (123-28). Consequently, each of my chapters considers how certain Midwest places provoke or cultivate specific experiences of the condition of modern secularity. For example, the open prairies and farms of the Midwest often induce and sustain the shift toward belief as possibility and increased options of seeking fulfillment, and this trend directly contributes to the Midwest's national moment in the early twentieth century. One well-known iteration of this is Jim Burden's remark on his first wagon ride across Nebraska: "I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be" (9).

Not all Midwesterners respond to its landscapes as Jim does, of course, and the myriad of reactions to the region reflects the heterogeneity of the rural Midwest. Comprised of different Native, Easterner, and immigrant groups, the twentieth-century rural Midwest uniquely reflected an ethnic diversity normally concentrated in cities. While each of these groups has motivated specialized study, Linda Pratt's recent *Great Plains Literature* surveys the bandwidth of historical heterogeneity in the Midwest reflected in its literatures. By living rurally, groups interacted with the landscapes they made home in more intimate and diverse ways than did counterparts living in cities with accelerated standardization and alienation from land. Inhabitants regularly felt that physical landscapes provoked deliberation over possibilities of belief and human fulfillment. Bringing their respective worldviews to bear on shared landscapes, representatives from different groups made unique yet overlapping claims to fulfillment, such that texts about a Norwegian fisherman and an African American entrepreneur reveal startling parallels when both homestead in South Dakota. My text grouping emphasizes these possibilities peculiar to the rural Midwest in the early twentieth century

in works like African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader* or Black Elk and John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*. In each chapter, I ask how place provokes different explorations of the question of secularity according to characters' respective identities. For Lutheran Norwegian Beret Holm, for example, the vastness of the prairie encourages religious fear, while it effects the opposite reaction in the agnostic African American Jean Baptiste. Often sidelined, stereotyped, or simply ignored, these variations of belief and unbelief in little-read Midwest literatures enhance our understanding of the figurative landscape of modernity. Rita Felski calls for the reanalysis of modernity from the vantage of subaltern groups, a directive that Janet Casey applies to the Midwest (20). While I pursue this concept in my fourth chapter, Casey's naming of the Midwest as a subaltern of modernity captures the broader spirit of this project that each of its chapters pursues.

Secularity in *Peder Victorious*

A look at the first pages of O. E. Rolvaag's *Peder Victorious* encapsulates the expanding options for belief and fulfillment in the modern Midwest landscape. *Peder Victorious* sequels Rolvaag's more frequently read *Giants in the Earth*, the subject of my following chapter. In *Giants*, Norwegian immigrants Per Hansa and Beret bear a son in the Dakota Territory and Per Hansa christens him Peder Victorious to signify the promise of the plains Per Hansa loves. *Peder Victorious* and *Their Fathers' God* complete the trilogy with Peder as the protagonist, moving from his early boyhood to adulthood. *Peder Victorious* opens by touring the three different rooms little Peder inhabits in his mind. In the first dwell his ambitions: "Here he dreamed the future, built it...The place was like a treasure cave, stacked full of marvelous riches. What fun to play with them, to

take things down and look at them, and to put them back again” (1). In this room “he lived everything in English,” and it is the only room where he feels “really at home and dare[s] to let himself go.” The second room is where his mother and siblings live in Norwegian. “Here he was not quite so happy, because all was so ordinary” (2). Peder especially feels frustrated with his “good-for-nothing” brothers’ lack of ambition to “get busy,” buy a thresher, and improve the family farm. In the third room lives God, “a dim, shadowy place, mysterious and secret, into which only God and he could come” (3). “It was immeasurably pleasant to be on good terms with God...Evenings Peder had long talks with God to remind Him of things He must not forget...old people were always so forgetful!” (4). The arrangement of these three rooms at the novel’s outset primes the reader to anticipate Peder’s transition to secularity. “At this time,” Rolvaag says of early boyhood, “Peder believed implicitly that God would help him to the most wonderful thing that could ever be got by any human being” (4-5). As the novel progresses, Peder comes to live less and less in Room 3 and transitions almost exclusively to Room 1.

The following pages initiate this transition. Peder’s early “implicit” belief recalls Taylor’s definition of pre-secularity in which belief is still assumed; Peder begins as not-secular because he cannot conceive of unbelief. “There had been a time when God was the most real thing in Peder’s life. He had never seen Him, to be sure, but to Peder that only made the reality all the more real” (3). The death of Per Hansa first rattles Peder’s assumption of belief: “The intimate comradeship between God and Peder came to an end during the spring that Father was found dead over west on the prairie” (5). While Peder does not immediately transition to unbelief, this event provokes him to view God as untrustworthy rather than trustworthy: “Suddenly God changed; He became a hard,

heartless monster...Henceforth no power on earth could make him believe that God, who had killed his father in this way, could be only goodness" (9). "This way" indicates the means of Per Hansa's death by the Midwest plains: "Blizzard after blizzard was whipping heaven and earth into a milling whiteness. People thought that all the fury of hell had been unloosed" (5). A major theme from *Giants* reverberates in these statements, namely, the Plains landscape's contribution to secularity. As my following chapter shows, throughout *Giants* the prairie encourages Per Hansa's own transition to secularity, and in a more tragic fashion the prairie again initiates his son's transition to secularity. While Peder initially still believes in God after his father's death, his mistrust of God as evil serves as a transition phase to God's recession from his mind altogether. While this recession takes two novels to complete, the early pages of *Peder Victorious* hint its beginning even in the first stages of Peder's grief: "From that moment God became a new being to Peder; He slipped farther and farther away—into utter remoteness" (7). "And his earliest image of Jesus likewise underwent a noticeable change; it receded into distance and unreality...Now that he stopped to think about it, that picture couldn't possibly be true" (11-12). Peder experiences the sense of loss common to unbelief: "Jesus' slipping away made Peder unhappy...now that He was gone, he felt the loss keenly." The transition from belief to unbelief in these few pages captures the theme of secularity that plays through different variations in my dissertation, each with timbres peculiar to the Midwest.

The Midwest sounds particularly clearly in Peder's first room, where he lives more and more after Per Hansa's death. The language of this room, a "treasure cave" in which Peder "bustled about, doing just what he pleased" inherits the language in *Giants*

reserved for Per Hansa's farm. Described as a fairy-tale kingdom, Per Hansa's imagined farm takes on enormous dimensions in proportion to the vastness of the uncultivated prairie he homesteads, and these fantasies inspire his incredible work ethic and ambitions. Although no scenes in Rolvaag's trilogy take place in Norway, the boundlessness of the prairie pointedly contrasts the economic ceiling left behind in Norway, a distinction more evident in novels featuring both old world and new world landscapes such as Johan Bojer's *The Emigrants*. For Peder and Per Hansa, the Dakota prairie allows opportunities that Norway never held, primarily economic but also geographical and ideological. Thus his brothers' disinterest in the region exasperates Peder: "Why, here was Dakota Territory about to become a state—yessir, an inseparable part of the very Union itself. Everybody was excited about it...Fairy tales and mighty deeds in all their talk. But here Store-Hans and Ole went about as calmly as though nothing were going on. They never even mentioned it" (2). As Peder transitions to secularity after his father's death, his regional commitments carry over to his theology: "Here he had found the solution to the whole perplexing business: It was in Norway God was keeping himself!...God was undoubtedly being kept too busy over in Norway to have time to come here" (15). Peder reinforces this theory to himself by contemplating self-reliance, the distinguishing mark of the pioneer spirit his father embodies. When he asks his mother whether Per Hansa prayed in Norwegian, Beret answers, "Father didn't pray...He wasn't that kind!" (17). Peder accepts this answer easily, reiterating it several times: "What would Father pray for? He could manage everything himself" (17). "Father didn't need any help...he could do anything he set his mind to" (7). "Americans were so much smarter than the Norwegians that they didn't need so much help [from God]" (15). Peder's conclusions

recall the similar effect of the prairie on young Jim Burden quoted earlier: “I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.”

The aforementioned outcome of secularity is that people consider new alternatives for meaningful life. Peder’s and Per Hansa’s imagined farm kingdoms represent one major option for fulfillment that this dissertation contemplates as distinctive of the early twentieth-century Midwest. As Peder secularizes, he finds less delight and reality in evening talks with God and increasing fascination with his agricultural treasure cave, which becomes more real as God recedes. But his farm fantasies are not immediately or purely materialist, and his growing sense of pioneer self-reliance also expresses itself in his desire to help others as one way to live authentically without God. He notices that the minister gives his mother practical advice about managing the farm as a widow, so he contemplates becoming a minister “if only he could avoid having anything to do with God, and just go about telling people how to manage so that they could make things go” (11). This plan imitates Per Hansa’s authentic helpfulness: “Even God Himself didn’t know much more than Father, and Father was every bit as ready to help...there was the man for you who could help!” (5). Peder decides that “the greatest thing on earth must be to make people happy—so full of joy that they had to laugh...*that’s what I want to do!*” (18-19). His combined search for fulfillment in agricultural materialism and helping others demonstrates in one person the expanding options that mark secularization.

The final way Peder Victorious embodies the themes of this project is in his defeat, which hints that his frontier of possibility, like Woody Grant’s, becomes a future of his past. In *Peder Victorious* and *Their Fathers’ God* Peder marries an Irish Catholic and attempts to go big in farming and local politics (the statehood of the Dakotas playing

a significant role in the novels). While his Lutheran mother and Catholic wife agonize over their respective religious commitments, particularly the baptism of Peder and Susie's son, Peder brushes off their concerns as irrelevant. As drought wrecks farms, these tensions spiral toward Peder's defeat in the final chapter of *Their Fathers' God*, in which he is publicly shamed at a political rally and Susie abandons him with their son. Bereft of the heir to his legacy, political ambitions dashed, Peder is left alone on a struggling farm. The trilogy closes on him fumbling incoherently for a cap hanging in plain sight, an impression that anticipates the aging vacancy of Woody Grant in *Nebraska* and indicates the precariousness of Peder's search for authentic fulfillment.

Peder Victorious thus embodies the overarching themes of this project: The transition to secularity as the possibility of (un)belief along with the expanding searches for authentic fulfillment that this transition generates, and how the Midwest uniquely fosters this process in the early twentieth-century U.S. The succeeding chapters study these themes through different windows and texts. My brief sketch of Peder, a little-studied Midwest protagonist, is intended as a referent for recognizing and placing them more easily as they reappear in the chapters.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter after this introduction sets up a series of questions about secular selfhood posed by Rolvaag's tragic hero Per Hansa in *Giants in the Earth*. As Per Hansa adopts a new identity of frontier self-reliance, a form of buffered selfhood prompted by the expansive Plains, his religious wife Beret becomes distressed over his soul's jeopardy and lack of felt need for God. In their respective commitments to individual independence and religious dependence, the couple thus stages a conflict between

modern and pre-modern selves. Yet while this clash disrupts the drift of Per Hansa's milieu toward secular individualism, Rolvaag refuses to fall back upon traditional faith. Rather, evidencing the influence of Søren Kierkegaard's agonized selfhood, he sets up an irreconcilable tension between modern and traditional modes of being. This irresolution demands relentless scrutiny of both, particularly the promise of secular fulfillment through materialistic self-reliance and the ability of traditional faith to respond to this modern promise that Per Hansa finds so compelling.

Featuring another South Dakotan homesteader, the next chapter takes up these themes through Oscar Micheaux's novel *The Homesteader*. Remembered as the first successful African American filmmaker, Micheaux fictionalized his entrepreneurial homesteading experiment in South Dakota through the novel's protagonist Jean Baptiste. The novel narrates Micheaux's plan for rural race materialism, a form of racial uplift that pursues economic prosperity through agricultural landholding in the vast Plains that similarly inspire Per Hansa. Essentially a secular gospel, rural race materialism offers promises of materialistic self-reliance similar those which attract Per Hansa but with a broader racial purpose. Driven to acquire one thousand acres as an example for his race, the ambitious Baptiste subconsciously instrumentalizes land and women to help him execute his goal. But as his vision undergoes failures and revisions throughout the novel, land and women evolve into placeholders of self-worth. Baptiste's unconscious dependence upon the very instruments he employs eventually calls into question his authenticity. But it also suggests what James Coleman calls "faithful vision," a belief in some form of supernatural aid for his race. Baptiste's faithful vision, which carries undertones of idealism, ventures that spiritual authenticity may be found in racial

identity. A conscious intervention in the debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, *Homesteader* questions whether modern individualism is in fact available to African Americans and illuminates how they actually navigated promises of modern selfhood.

Chapter four asks whether art can provide secular fulfillment by comparing Willa Cather's *My Antonia* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. Resisting the same materialism that absorbs Per Hansa and Jean Baptiste, Cather and Lewis take up the idea of art as a secular religion and source of human connection. They conclude that ordinary devotion in the course of everyday rhythms, rather than art for art's sake, offers authenticity, but they suggest that art plays the important role of acknowledging and appreciating ordinary devotion. Both identify the immigrant farms of the Midwest as uniquely able to sustain this kind of ordinary devotion because of their paradoxical nexus of stability and marginality. Only on these farms do Carol Kennicott and Jim Burden experience the transforming power of the ordinary, and as protagonists they function like secular priests who sanctify everyday devotion that would otherwise go unacknowledged. Nonetheless, while Lewis and Cather put forward the Midwest as the home of ordinary fulfillment, Lewis in particular remains deeply unsettled about any modern promise for fulfillment. The Midwest depicted by these novels thus assumes the proportions of an important but overlooked subaltern of modernity. The heartland of the nation yet inhabited by foreigners estranged from the centers of modernity, the Midwest takes on a strangeness and uncertainty even while Cather and Lewis insist upon it as the place to which one must eventually come home.

The final chapter on *Black Elk Speaks* takes up Deloria's aforementioned suggestion that the early twentieth century opened a brief window of new possibilities for Native-white relations. While the collaborative nature of the project makes it difficult to distinguish the respective contributions of Black Elk and John Neihardt, it also exemplifies this particular window. Black Elk's voice emerges in the Great Vision and in his interactions with the white world as a relational orientation according to cosmic patterns, or relationships rightly ordered after the structures of the cosmos. Neihardt's worldview, on the other hand, takes shape around his emphasis on the creative vision, which leads to a higher consciousness that reflects his heritage of transcendentalism and exhibits vestiges of the buffered self. The point on which the two voices converge is their emphasis on place as a source of well-being. Like Lewis and Cather in chapter four, both Neihardt and Black Elk critique materialist culture, and they find an antidote to the placelessness of materialism in attachment to specific places they call home in the Midwest. In the sense of place which evolves from these collaborative interactions on place, the text epitomizes the spiritual nova that Taylor describes as characteristic of modern secularity. This sense of place, more than a sum of Black Elk's and Neihardt's voices, amounts to a new spiritual route to fulfillment—a third way generated by the conditions of secularity that Taylor outlines.

Secularity in the Midwest, as it plays out in these chapters, thus becomes a complex network of unique yet overlapping claims to authentic selfhood in modern America. While the majority of the authors and protagonists examined here pursue routes to fulfillment apart from belief in God, the structure of the chapters suggests that it is too soon, or perhaps too late, to define secularity simply as a tilt toward unbelief. The

chapter bookends of Rolvaag's unresolved interplay between modern and pre-modern selves and Neihardt's and Black Elk's spiritual third way imply that secularity continues to sustain a landscape of possibilities for both belief and unbelief, even blurring this distinction at times. My final chapter closes with Taylor's own conclusion that secularization has yet to run its course and that its next stages are unpredictable, though he ventures that current interest in alternative spiritualities will continue. Pondering the early twentieth-century landscape from the vantage of our own time, we might be surprised that the literatures of the Midwest encompass as many rings of the nova effect as they do. I suggest that the rural Midwest gives us one of the widest possible ranges of belief and unbelief that existed in the nation at its time, and that this quality of subalternity—estranged from purported centers of modernity yet generating relevance of its own—lies at the heart of the region's meaning.

Note

1. This project accepts the OED's definition of the U.S. Midwest as the states west of the Ohio River and east of the Rocky Mountains.

Chapter Two: Self-Reliance and Modern Illusion in O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*

When O. E. Rolvaag published *Giants in the Earth* in 1927, he was contributing to an established conversation about the frontier and self-reliance. The frontier had been nationally popularized by historians like Frederick Jackson Turner, who promoted it as a space with a special claim to self-reliance. In Turner's essays, the frontier's undeveloped landscape required ambition and adaptation, an experience which forged from its diverse inhabitants a collective national consciousness. This American spirit, captured in Turner's essays as the figure of the pioneer, honors autonomy and surmounts limits. In elevating the pioneer as the ideal self, Turner's thesis represents a trajectory of texts like Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on self-reliance and Walt Whitman's poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!", taken up in novels like Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* To this collective national myth, Rolvaag's *Giants* seems to contribute. As its subtitle *A Saga of the Prairie* signals, it follows the classic frontier narrative through its hero Per Hansa, who emigrates from Norway in the late 1800s to start a farm in the Dakota Territory. Inspired by the expansive landscape of the Dakota prairie, Per Hansa promises to perfect the pioneer ideal through his indefatigable energy and legendary farming success won through bootstrap self-reliance. But compared to its contemporaries, *Giants* troubles the pioneer narrative in some obvious ways, since Per Hansa's wife Beret opposes his goals from the beginning and a blizzard kills him in the end. Although the novel is clearly invested in self-reliance, these factors make it an anomaly within the frontier genre.

Perhaps because of its unsettled place in the genre, *Giants* is often read as a novel about immigration and ethnicity or, less frequently, about religion. These readings help account for the novel's resistance to the frontier myth of self-reliance, yet in doing so

they raise new problems. Beret, the most complex and problematic character in the book, is the novel's voice of resistance to Americanization, but she expresses this resistance not mainly in terms of love for her Norwegian culture and homeland but in terms of religious fear—a religiosity most readers have found excessive and unhealthy. This double fact makes it difficult to read the novel as positively affirmative of Norwegian traditions and of the multicultural society emerging in the American Midwest, or, on the other hand, of traditional faith. The frontier reading, the immigrant reading, and the religious reading question each other, suggesting very different interpretations of the novel's central theme. This chapter seeks to reconcile these readings by suggesting that what is truly at stake in the novel is the shape of the modern self: to Rolvaag, the most important question is how self-reliance affects the soul. That is, *Giants'* fundamental concern is whether self-reliance as a uniquely modern mindset delivers the autonomy and authenticity it promises, and whether these outcomes better the shape of the self. In advancing this argument, I will draw on Charles Taylor's characterization of modern selfhood, showing that the novel stages, in the persons of Per Hansa and Beret, a conflict between modern and pre-modern modes of self-reliance and dependence. Ultimately, neither of these modes of selfhood is endorsed by the novel. Rather, Rolvaag, influenced by Søren Kierkegaard's critiques of both traditional religion and modern secularism, sets up an irresolvable tension in which both Per Hansa and Beret fail to live authentically by their own standards. Under the scrutiny of Kierkegaardian authenticity, Per Hansa's quest for self-reliance dissolves into self-satisfaction and unacknowledged reliance on materialism, yet Beret's spiritual paralysis fails on its part to embody authentic Christianity. Beret's and Per Hansa's opposite failures thus unsettle the drift of their milieu toward modern

secular individualism, yet without settling back into pre-modern dependence. Reading Rolvaag's novel through this Kierkegaardian lens shows how the text enacts a classically existentialist debate over the modern self in the landscape of the Plains, a frontier which both invites and penalizes self-reliance. Understanding the novel as a text about the modern soul provokes new conceptions of the relationship between immigration and religion on the Plains and of the influence of Turner's frontier myth on the immigrant experience. Moreover, it suggests that *Giants* should be understood not only as an important contribution to Plains immigrant literatures but also as a treatise on a core tenet of modernity.

Beret's Problems and Rolvaag as Novelist

Beret considers self-reliance to be spiritual pride, a view that has not usually won out with readers because she presents significant difficulties as a character. Her theology is characterized by fear and guilt and is largely devoid of redemption. Unhappy on the prairie, she considers her unhappiness a punishment for earlier sins of conceiving a child out of wedlock with Per Hansa and marrying him against her parents' wishes. A representative passage of her guilt-inspired ruminations states, "Now had fallen the punishment which the Lord God had meted out to her; at last His visitation had found her out and she must drink the cup of his wrath. Far away had she fled...but the arm of His might had reached farther still" (255). She lays this sense of impending judgment on Per Hansa as well: "'That's right!' she crooned... 'Weep now, weep much and long because of your sin!...So I have done every night, not that it helps much...Out here nobody pays attention to our tears...it's too open and wild...but it does no harm to try'" (398). In addition to her fascination with guilt and punishment, Beret also suffers a period of

psychological illness intricately couched in religious language. This sickness climaxes in her violent protest at the baptism of her newborn son, Peder Victorious. She cries, ““This evil deed shall not be done!...How can a man be *victorious* out here, where the evil one gets us all!’...She foamed at the mouth...‘This is the work of the devil!’ she muttered through clenched teeth...‘Now he will surely take my little boy!’” (431-32). Perhaps most problematically, Beret urges Per Hansa into a blizzard against his will to get a minister for their dying neighbor, and this blizzard causes Per Hansa’s death (519).

Behaviors like these shake Beret’s spiritual credibility for readers and lead many to dismiss her voice in the novel as fanatical. Rolvaag’s first biographers Theodore Jorgenson and Nora O. Solum call Beret’s religious beliefs “warped” and deem Per Hansa’s healthier, and most scholars have followed suit (344-51). Neil Eckstein, who assesses the novel as a critique of American society, states that Beret’s “dark, brooding religion...offers little in the way of comment upon the social scene, for it was concerned almost entirely with the state of an abnormal mind” (134). Werner Sollors and Mariolina Salvatori each use the phrase “fanatically religious” to describe Beret, and Salvatori states that Beret’s fanaticism ultimately causes Per Hansa’s death (Sollors 94, Salvatori 40). Kristoffer F. Paulson describes Beret as “negative, fearful, and downright grim,” and her spiritual framework as “arrogant, singular, and narrow” (202, 211). He attributes the sin of pride to her, not to Per Hansa, in that she harshly judges Per Hansa’s spiritual condition; and he considers her reliance on religious rituals like communion “fanatical” (211-12, 209). Some studies account for Beret’s extreme religiosity by reading the novel through a feminist lens, explaining her behavior as the psychological price of wifedom to Per Hansa’s dominant masculine vision of the frontier. John Muthyala states, for

example, that Per Hansa's "paternalist and patriarchal economy leaves no place for Beret to exist" and "requires her disappearance as a woman" (241). His analysis considers Beret an example of Annette Kolodny's broader observation about frontier women as reluctant participants in men's fantasies, "captive, as it were, in someone else's imagination" (6). The assessment that all the above readings agree upon, feminist or otherwise, is that Beret's specific version of spirituality impedes her well-being as a person and her face-value credibility as a literary character.

In recent years, Rolvaag scholarship has taken up Beret's religiosity to focus on its problematic fusion with her ethnic and immigrant identities. Erica Haugtvedt sees Beret as part of Rolvaag's lifelong project toward "a culturally pluralistic American vision in which ethnic American enclaves would be allowed to co-exist and thrive" (147). In Haugtvedt's assessment, Rolvaag conflates his moral code with Norwegian ethnicity in an attempt to preserve a cultural "ideal of comforting familiarity that never existed" (166). Specifically, Beret employs the language of her Lutheran faith to communicate fear of losing Norwegian identity, blurring her religion and ethnicity in an imagined idealistic past as Rolvaag himself does. Sara Eddy focuses on a similar theme in her analysis, which examines Beret's concept of race. Eddy's title, "'Wheat and Potatoes': Reconstructing Whiteness in O. E. Rolvaag's Immigrant Trilogy," refers to Beret's comment in that Irish (potatoes) and Norwegians (wheat) should not be stored in the same bin (Rolvaag, *Their Fathers' God* 264). Focusing on the dual binary of Lutheranism and Catholicism alongside Norwegian and Irish ethnicities, Eddy concludes that the novel frames "the anxieties of immigration" in religious terms (141-43). In Ingeborg Kongslien's analysis, this religious frame damages the artistry of the whole

novel, an effect which Kongslien describes as “ideological and didactic overload” impeding the more central themes of diversity and difference (189). Linda Pratt’s analysis, while not faulting the novel’s artistry as a whole, also presents Beret’s religiosity as inextricable from her ethnic motives and ultimately inspired by her fear of strange people and places. Beret’s religious “fanaticism” becomes a mechanism for coping with her foreign environment: “Only the rigidities of an extreme conservatism in Norwegian traditions and religious beliefs allow her to order the chaos of her mental world. Everything in her world becomes right or wrong, and she is the one who knows what is right...She does not want anyone but Norwegians to be part of the community” (49-50). These several analyses demonstrate a pattern of interpreting religion not simply as authentic faith but as a vehicle for conveying the ethnic ideals held more dearly by characters like Beret.

An exception to this pattern is Harold Simonson’s insistence that the details of Beret’s theology matter as much as or more than her ethnicity, which demonstrates how a religious reading of the novel pushes against the immigration readings. Simonson works through objections to Beret in a systematic critique of scholarship’s treatment of religion in the novel. Reexamining Beret’s fearfulness, he argues that her fear is not just a form of psychological guilt or ethnic preservationism. Buried within these problematic tendencies is the theologically sound remembrance that fear can be healthy. Fear of God, such as Pauline “fear and trembling,” is scripturally endorsed as a sign of godliness and spiritual sensitivity (“Beret Revisited” 147-48). As a self-reliant American pioneer, Per Hansa considers all fear weakness, while Beret offers a corrective to this view. Her corrective is obviously problematic, and Simonson does not pretend that she exemplifies

a robust understanding of the redemption that should assuage guilt. Rather, Beret's distortions attest to Rolvaag's artistry as a novelist: Simonson posits that Rolvaag wisely makes Beret an imperfect character to make the novel more realistic, so her flaws should not prohibit her from speaking to the novel's central themes. To "write her off" as a religious or psychological fanatic underestimates Rolvaag's deliberate construction of her imperfections: "He was too much the novelist and too little the apologist to portray Beret all glowing in white and Per Hansa lost in total darkness" (*Prairies* 46, 20). Finally, Simonson states that Beret's "fanatics" do not cause Per Hansa's death if one sees his spiritual fate as more important than his physical fate. Per Hansa dies spiritually long before he goes out into the blizzard, and he dies physically thinking that he is still his own master. While Beret's motives for urging him are tinged with her own flawed fear, Per Hansa's acquiescence to her request ultimately results from following his own code of self-reliance; he cannot have Beret or anyone else think he is a coward (Rolvaag, *Giants* 520, 335, 355-57). To attribute Per Hansa's death to Beret's religiosity obscures Per Hansa's own agency and motives throughout the novel and "reduces Rolvaag's theme to inconsequence" (Simonson, *Prairies* 23-24).

In short, Simonson argues that Beret is actually closer to Rolvaag's own position than many readers assume. He quotes Rolvaag: "Some people get out of patience with [Beret], and I in turn with them because of their lack of understanding" (21-23).

Rolvaag's sympathy with Beret accords with his own background. He immigrated to South Dakota at age twenty to help his uncle farm, but soon became disheartened with the lifestyle of "New Canaan" and later called the experience his "Babylonian captivity" (Reigstad 27-29). The following journal entry about his fellow Norwegian-Americans

reflects concern not for loss of Norwegian culture but for spiritual loss, resonating with Beret's concern for Per Hansa:

Again I have tramped about another day and have met with none except crippled souls...their highest interests are hogs, cattle, and horses....Isn't it appalling that a human being, created by God to be an intelligent person and given an immortal soul, can say nothing but, 'Give us this day our daily bread'! What will become of such earthworms when they die? The spiritual life, received from God as the most precious gift, is dead...What becomes of such a soul?...Thank God, there are also other people! (qtd. in Reigstad 32)

Rolvaag originally planned to become a Lutheran pastor but considered himself inadequate for the subtleties of theology, so he turned to writing novels instead (Eckstein 128). He believed that "religious experience could in fact be the central element in a secular novel" and aimed to demonstrate this belief through his own novels (Simonson, *Prairies* 40; Jorgenson and Solum 209). He applied this principle in his literary criticism as well. In an essay titled "Christian Doctrine in Ibsen's 'Peer Gynt' (A Study of Egotism)," he states the ideal of the play as "Take up your cross and follow me!" (89). In a critique of his fellow Norwegian novelist Johan Bojer's *The Great Hunger*, he assesses the main character's "hunger" as "a restless longing to understand the spirit of things *i.e.* God"—an understanding accomplished through the character's religious conversion ("Novelist" 65). These analyses accord with the ideal of Rolvaag's own novel, in Simonson's view: "*Giants in the Earth* is far more than a national epic of immigration and the westward movement. Its underlying issue is salvation" (*Prairies* 36).

Simonson is important because he reminds us that the religious reading of *Giants* supported by Rolvaag's biography and the novel itself is too explicit to ignore. He attempts to do justice to Beret's theology and work through her problems on her own terms. He also endeavors to reconcile his religious reading with other readings' insights

on immigration and ethnicity by affirming the “great importance” Rolvaag places upon Norwegian immigrant culture but reminding critics of its intricate relationship to Rolvaag’s spiritual commitments as a novelist (39). Read this way, *Giants* challenges the pioneer myth from a standpoint that is more than one culture’s critique of another. This reading enriches current discussion of ethnicity and immigration in *Giants* by reemphasizing the theology of the immigrant experience through its interaction with Turner’s frontier thesis. However, in attempting to redeem Beret’s reputation, Simonson leans toward favoring her as a solution in the novel and narrowing the novel’s scope to salvation. Although he acknowledges Beret’s flaws as well as Rolvaag’s sympathy for Per Hansa, he implies a theological tidiness that the novel resists and inadvertently removes it from larger spheres of conversation.

Dependence and Self-Reliance

At this juncture, Charles Taylor’s conceptualization of the modern self offers a productive reading of Beret and Per Hansa that locates them within the larger debate about modern authenticity. In *A Secular Age* Taylor outlines the conceptual shift from the pre-modern to modern self. The pre-modern mindset of the medieval age sees the self as essentially weak. In the pre-modern world, people thought of themselves as having “porous” selves, vulnerable to outside influences like demons or forces of nature (35-40). The natural world reminded the pre-modern self of its dependence on transcendent powers, a stance we see in Beret, who is troubled by Per Hansa’s apparent invulnerability. It would be easy, as Rita Filanti observes, to see Beret’s timidity and Per Hansa’s assurance in terms of gendered domesticity and conquest, but their difference runs deeper than these types (315). The following analysis will explain their conflict as

generated by a clash between modernity and pre-modernity: While Per Hansa embraces the modern codes of autonomy and resistance to authority, as the following analysis will show, Beret's perspective gives a pre-modern reading of these attitudes as spiritually unsafe. Thus, when their cows run away, she interprets the misfortune as "an act of Providence" to warn them against thinking too much of themselves (115). When locusts attack their crops, she responds to the travesty as a spiritual plague intended to move them to humility, and Per Hansa discovers her weeping penitently in the bottom of their immigrant chest (397-98). She worries that Per Hansa ignores normal human weaknesses, and when he starts to clock sixteen-hour workdays, she tries to convince him to stay in bed longer because "he was only a human being" (57). Although she desires to explain her sense of dependence to Per Hansa, she fears that he cannot comprehend her apprehensions and that his self-reliance erects a barrier between their communication. In a line that recalls Kolodny's metaphor of a captive in someone else's fantasy, she realizes, "What would be the use of speaking now? He was so completely wrapped up in his own plans that he would not listen nor understand" (49). Per Hansa's relational independence intimidates her against expressing her own sense of self as dependent.

That Beret's crisis takes place on the frontier is not accidental. The frontier stages the debate between modern and pre-modern mindsets, and Beret's mindset of dependence is accordingly provoked and accentuated by the frontier. Unlike Turner, whose prairie invites dominion, Beret sees the natural world exerting power over humans rather than vice versa. Consequently, she perceives the prairie as wielding demonic force over its subjects and Per Hansa as succumbing to its spell. She repeatedly imagines a giant monster sucking their quarter-section into its mouth and concludes that "this desolation

out here called forth all that was evil in human nature” (378, 176). Intriguingly, her view accords with descriptions written from the viewpoint of omniscient narration: “That night the Great Prairie stretched herself voluptuously; giantlike and full of cunning, she laughed softly into the reddish moon. ‘Now we’ll see what human may avail against us!’” (398-99). The novel’s title echoes Genesis 6:4, quoted in the book’s inset: “There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.” Although Per Hansa sees himself as one of these mighty men, the closing chapter of the novel suggests that the ominous giant is the prairie itself by its title, “The Great Plains Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied” (484). In one of the few sections where the novel zooms out to comment on westward expansion as whole, it describes “the west-fever” as a menacing spell: “People were intoxicated by bewildering visions; they spoke dazedly, as though under the force of a spell...a Beulah Land of corn and wine!...She [Beulah Land] had never dreamed that the good Lord would let such folly loose among men...Could Destiny have spun his web more cunningly?” (259-60). In a description that Beret would agree with, Yesim Basarir describes *Giants*’s prairie as quietly corroding each character as the novel progresses. Pioneers like Per Hansa intend to become the “god of the prairie,” but instead, wiled by the prairie, they fall into “satanic” disregard for human limitation and become conquered by the very space they intend to conquer (96, 99).

When Per Hansa looks at the prairie, however, he sees a kingdom of crops and fences. Against Beret’s dependent self, he represents the modern mindset that Taylor describes as “buffered” or self-reliant. The modern buffered self developed within

Reformation and Enlightenment thought, building firmer boundaries between it and the world and more invulnerability to outside influences. Unlike the dependent self, the buffered self is not as easily intimidated by spiritual forces like demons, nor does it see natural disasters like blizzards or locusts as spiritually laden (37-41, 135). Accordingly, Per Hansa treats mishaps in the natural world as challenges to defy through hard work and ingenuity rather than as spiritual warnings. When he nearly dies in a blizzard, he becomes angry rather than humbled: “Struggling through the storm, he felt more and more disgusted with God Almighty. To take him away from Beret now would be a wicked thing, whichever way you looked at it...What could He expect to accomplish by such a wrong?” (311). During the locust attack which terrifies Beret, Per Hansa refuses to acknowledge his helplessness and fires his rifle into the cloud of insects as an act of defiance: “His utter impotence in the face of this tragedy threw him into an uncontrollable fury” (392-93).

As a modern, Per Hansa perceives the space of the frontier differently than Beret. Filanti observes that the space of the prairie appears to Beret as a desolation but to Per Hansa as a kingdom (308). On Per Hansa’s part, as with Turner’s pioneer, the prairie plays a significant role in kindling his attitude of “I can do anything.” The seemingly unsettled plains of South Dakota encourage his belief in his ability to achieve great things: “This vast stretch of beautiful land was to be his—yes, *his*...His heart began to expand with a mighty exaltation...‘Good God!’ he panted. ‘This kingdom is going to be *mine!*’” (41). Similar to Turner’s description of the prairie, in which dank swamps prompt visions of jostling cities (153), the Dakota landscape provokes detailed fantasies in Per Hansa’s imagination. Despite his modernizing qualities, his vision retains benign

vestiges of enchantment like “fairy tale” and “magic horn,” which sound pre-modern rather than modern. But the image produced by these enchantments is earthy and material and conspicuously devoid of dangerous supernatural elements like Beret’s monsters:

Stranger things than this transpired in fancy—just as in the fairy tale: they seemed to lie enchanted under the most prosaic and deceptive semblances, invisible to the eye of man; but then he came and touched them, pouring on a few drops from the magic horn... Yes, sir—there it was! Nothing less than a snow-white picket fence around a big, big garden! And many trees grew there, both within and without; some bore apples, others various kinds of fruit: and some...*some had cones*...yes, trees with *pine cones* on them! (127)

The contrast between this vision of the prairie and Beret’s vision of a sucking monster demonstrates the appeal of the modern mindset. Taylor describes the attractiveness of the buffered self for all the reasons that Per Hansa is allured by it: “Power, reason, invulnerability, a decisive distancing from age-old fears...Above all, there is a certain pride, and a sense of one’s own worth...of having won through to this invulnerability out of an earlier state of captivity in an enchanted world” (301). Per Hansa has accomplished exactly that—he makes himself king of the frontier without saddling himself with Beret’s fears of demonic plagues or monsters. While her fantasies reflect a sincere pre-modern belief in supernatural powers, Per Hansa’s enchanted fairy castle is simply “a metaphor for his self-confidence” (Quantic 247). By relocating his fantasies outside religion, he exercises Taylor’s buffered self-reliance in the frontier setting that Turner portrays as especially conducive to this mindset.

The “can do” attitude of frontier self-reliance is further reflected in Per Hansa’s mythical representation in the novel. The subtitle “saga” gestures toward the novel’s roots in Nordic heroism, and Rolvaag reinvents the language of kingship and myth

throughout the novel to describe Per Hansa's ambitions as an immigrant farmer in a nation that promises endless upward mobility. Although Per Hansa begins humbly as a poor Norwegian fisherman, he is fascinated, like Turner's pioneers, by the prospect of limitless achievement in the American frontier: "Per Hansa was transported, was carried farther and ever farther away on the wings of a wondrous fairy tale—a romance in which he was both prince and king, the sole possessor of countless treasures." (125). He plans to acquire not one but two quarter-sections of farmland, "an estate more magnificent than that of many a king of old" (126). His kingdom vision fuels him with superhuman energy: "He felt as if his strength were inexhaustible," so he lengthens his workdays from fourteen to sixteen hours, only to wonder "if a man couldn't get along with only five hours of rest" (125, 53). Because of his relentless work ethic, he becomes legendary throughout the area for feats of strength and endurance: "It was like an incident out of a fairy tale, that famous load," and "he achieved something that is still told about in the legends of that settlement" (67-68, 329). To his more pre-modern neighbors, his successes seem like "witchcraft" or "miracle" (56, 99). Reading Per Hansa as Taylor's modern self in such passages shows how aspects of the frontier, immigrant, and even religious readings coalesce under the umbrella of the shift to modern independence and autonomy.

Per Hansa further embodies modern self-reliance by defying authority and competition. He tells Beret, "No worn-out, thin-shanked, pot-bellied king is going to come around and tell me what I have to do" (50). He keeps secret his plan to acquire an extra quarter-section until he can claim it (126), and he takes pride in sowing his seed before anyone else: "Now he had turned a fine trick—he was through seeding and

dragging before his neighbours had even thought of beginning the regular spring work!” (342). He exhibits “towering ill humour” when his neighbors leave him behind on an expedition to town (74), and he becomes especially competitive when his rival Torkel plans to build a wooden house before he does. When Torkel insults Per Hansa’s sod house, Per Hansa reacts: ““Then you and I will fight—yes, you and I!—for both the scepter and the crown’...in his effort to control himself he felt in his pocket for a match, found one, and hurled it to the floor...‘We’ll get our decency and civilized living all right—even if you should go back where you came from!’” (355-56). His words echo Turner’s description of the frontier as a “contest” that honors the man with the quickest eye and strongest grasp (153). This posture also explains why Beret finds herself unable to communicate her sense of dependence to Per Hansa as something other than a display of weakness.

In fact, as the novel progresses Per Hansa becomes gradually resistant to Beret’s voice in his life, a relational hardening that represents his maturation of self-reliance and the subsequent gap between pre-modern and modern selves. Early in the novel Per Hansa holds Beret’s opinion in high regard: “She wasn’t a bit stupid, that wife of his! As a matter of fact she had more sense than most people” (17). When Beret cries for the first time in the opening chapter, he nearly cries too, and the chapter resolves peacefully: “That night Per Hansa was good to his wife” (24). But he soon senses the gulf widening between them: “As he walked beside her and held her hand, he felt as if he could laugh and cry in the same breath...She was so dear, so dear to him. Why could he never make her understand it fully?” (51). Midway through the novel, Beret gives birth to a son in an intensely spiritual scene. During her near-death labor Per Hansa contemplates suicide

and at one point actually shouts, “Satan—now you shall leave her alone!” (270-71). His vulnerability in this moment is intense, but he recovers within minutes to christen his son Peder Victorious. This triumphant name greatly disturbs Beret and signals that the infant’s near-death birth has bolstered rather than stricken Per Hansa’s self-reliance (277, 290). Later in the novel in a climactic scene, Beret suddenly recovers from her mental illness which has devastated the family for months. For perhaps half an hour tears roll down Per Hansa’s face in a “paroxysm” of relief. Then, as soon as he can “master” himself, he “laughed boisterously, rose to his feet, and stretched himself. ‘I guess I’d better hurry up and get that rickety roof fixed...We must begin building here as soon as Hans Olsa can find time to help!’” (482-83). By pushing himself past these moments of vulnerability toward his wife, Per Hansa is acting consistently with the code of the self-reliant pioneer, who resists dependence. As a result, by the novel’s end he views Beret as a needy child rather than a wife or partner, a transition that allows him to delegitimize her challenge to his code of self-reliance and achieve relational independence (516).

Although Per Hansa’s self-reliance matures throughout the novel, his death at the novel’s end appears to dislodge this accomplishment, since the prairie seems to best Per Hansa. However, Per Hansa can be read as following the code of self-reliance to the death, which makes him a modern hero rather than a failure. Lost in the blizzard which eventually kills him, he maintains defiant optimism: “The swirling dusk grew deeper...Darkness gathered fast...More snow began to fall...Whirls of it came off the tops of the drifts, circled about, struck him full in the face...No danger—the wind held steady...At home all was well...and now mother was saying her evening prayers...Move one!—Move on!...” (530). If this confidence breaks in his final moments, it is hidden

from the reader, for his next appearance is the discovery of his body the following spring in the final lines of the novel. Even as a corpse, he seems not to have given up: “On the west side of the stack sat a man, with his back to the mouldering hay. This was in the middle of a warm day in May, yet the man had two pairs of skis...To the boys, it looked as though the man were sitting there resting while he waited for better skiing...His eyes were set toward the west” (530-31). Doubtless Turner would commend this west-facing death as heroic, which seems to allow the frontier reading to reclaim the novel. Per Hansa’s death pushes modern self-reliance to its fullest realization, which the frontier experience memorializes in the grave of the pioneer.

Simonson’s religious reading, however, interprets Per Hansa’s death as evidence for the novel’s core theme of salvation. An additional aspect of Taylor’s buffered self explains the conflict between Per Hansa and Beret that instigates his fatal trip, which broadens both Simonson’s inadvertently limited religious reading and the frontier reading. As self-reliance gains sway in Western thought, Taylor states that taking charge of one’s own destiny becomes admirable rather than prideful. Consequently, one’s life goals become more self-focused rather than God-focused, which constitutes a shift toward what Taylor terms “human flourishing” (262). At first, the goal of human flourishing still fits within a God-centered worldview via the Reformation’s sacralization of ordinary life. But shifting life’s ultimate good to human flourishing makes it easier for God and transcendent goals to eventually fall out of the picture altogether during the Enlightenment (221-69). In other words, in the pre-modern world God was on top; in the modern world humans are on top (18-19). Thus, human flourishing emerges as the ultimate good in the modern secularized world, the world that Per Hansa represents. This

new secular view of the human subject prioritizes goals that benefit the self on earth versus the goal of glorifying God in light of eternity.

The shift to human flourishing explains why Per Hansa cares about potato fields rather than the state of his neighbor's soul and why he treats Beret's religious concerns as those of a frail child. His focus on purely human flourishing seems innocuous to him, even responsible. Who else will champion his family's survival in the Dakota wilderness, if not he? To modern readers as well, self-reliance and human flourishing seem second nature. Particularly to an early twentieth century readership, Per Hansa's goals are not far from an ordinary hardworking man pursuing the American Dream. What could be sinful about Per Hansa's picket fences and pine trees? Although Per Hansa thinks of himself in grandiose terms, his ambitions are earthy—plant a potato field, replace his oxen with horses, build a white house with windows, and own two quarter-sections of land (49-52, 126). Moreover, these plans center appealingly around Per Hansa's princess/wife Beret: “How hard he would strive to make life pleasant for her out here! Her image dominated all the visions which now seemed to come to him of their own accord” (52). He promises Beret, “Just wait, my girl...you'll see how wonderful I can make it for you, this kingdom of ours!” (50). Such descriptions soften the excessiveness of Per Hansa's “can do” attitude with a relatable image of a family man who loves his wife, a model of modern secular virtue.

But Beret, as we have seen, cares little for Per Hansa's modern virtue. Because she retains belief in the transcendent, she prioritizes spiritual concerns above human flourishing, and she feels troubled that Per Hansa does not do the same. Although Per Hansa does not explicitly reject religion, he expresses disregard for spiritual matters.

When the circuit minister exhorts him to carry his cross, he retorts that more important matters absorb one's attention on the frontier: "We find other things to do out here than to carry crosses!" (438). What does preoccupy him is any potential threat to his fairy castle. When he discovers competing stakes on his quarter section, for instance, he feels so disturbed that "he could not have mentioned it to anyone for the price of his soul"—a laden metaphor for a literally earthly matter (133). He dismisses Beret's "growing religious concern" as "a notion on the part of a frail child" (515); when she confronts his destruction of the competing landmarks as "poor Christianity," he laughs, "We need a preacher, I hear... Well, now we've got one!" (176). Beret insists that he ought to be leading family devotions, an idea he also laughs off as better suited to her department (516). But when her prayers during the new devotional routine make him feel like "the most hardened sinner in all Christendom," they begin to "get on his nerves." This ongoing conflict climaxes when Beret asks Per Hansa to fetch a minister for their dying neighbor. Per Hansa dismisses Beret's concern for Hans Olsa's salvation as amusing, confident that Hans Olsa's solidly average soul is "good enough" for the Lord: "If Hans Olsa is bound in that direction, there'll be a good many more from here in the same boat!...He'll land in the right place, don't worry." Beret objects, "You know what our life has been: land and houses, and then more land, and cattle!...Can't you understand that a human being ever becomes concerned over his sins and wants to be freed from them?" (518). To Beret, Per Hansa's human flourishing has lured him to believe he no longer needs God, a self-sufficiency she finds "blasphemous" rather than virtuous.

Kierkegaard and Unacknowledged Gods

Understanding Per Hansa and Beret as modern and pre-modern selves provides a historical lens that helps reconcile the frontier, religious, and immigrant readings. As Taylor stated earlier, modernity claims that the buffered self is an improvement on the pre-modern dependent self; Per Hansa's prairie shows how self-reliance can present a more reassuring, monster-free world. This promise leads to a new question, which Kierkegaard's influence upon Rolvaag invites: Does modern self-reliance achieve true autonomy and lead to a more authentic life? Expanding Rolvaag's first biographers' reference to Kierkegaard, Simonson examines evidence for the influence of Kierkegaard's writings on Rolvaag ("Rolvaag and Kierkegaard" 67-80). Although Rolvaag does not credit or cite Kierkegaard explicitly as the source of inspiration for his fiction, Simonson concurs with Jorgenson and Solum that Rolvaag studied Kierkegaard with diligence. As a boy, for example, Rolvaag read aloud *Either/Or* with friends and debated its meaning; as a professor at Saint Olaf he followed Kierkegaard's argument on a biblical text point by point in a speech of his own (Tweet 6; Simonson, "Rolvaag and Kierkegaard" 70-71). Simonson traces dominant themes throughout Rolvaag's corpus to Kierkegaard, taking as his extended example the dilemma of choice in Per Hansa in connection to Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (69, 74-79). In the analysis which follows below, Kierkegaard's ideas about dependence and self-reliance, particularly his discourse "To Need God Is a Human Being's Highest Perfection," are brought to bear upon *Giants*. A Kierkegaardian understanding of dependence and self-reliance reads the novel thus: The modern self challenges the pre-modern as inauthentic, but *Giants*'s irresolution returns this challenge to ask if either mode of life is really authentic.

Kierkegaard is usually associated with existentialism, which seems at first more compatible with self-reliance than with dependence. Walter Kaufmann states that Kierkegaard's main contribution to modern thought is the category of the individual, which is the tenet of existentialism (*Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre* 16). But the existentialist individual does not equate with modern individualism; Per Hansa has a high view of himself, but Kierkegaard aims to offend self-satisfaction. The accomplishments of the buffered self are to Kierkegaard not triumphs but delusions and distractions, with which the modern milieu coddles the self like an indulgent parent: "Just lie still and sleep, and I shall go out and buy something for you, and next time it will be your turn" ("To Need God" 316). That is, rather than provoking the individual to self-evaluate, modernity applauds unreflecting self-satisfaction, conveying the message "that there are some people who are fortunate and are supposed to enjoy life and that he [the self] is one of them" (315). Kierkegaard contends that the authentic individual, in contrast, distrusts self-satisfaction and is characterized rather by agony or anxiety. "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate," he states, and "the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man" (*Concept of Anxiety* 155). This kind of sustained, profound anxiety is more authentic than the buffered self, which may be temporarily anxious en route to success but eventually lands at self-satisfaction. Authentic existence, in contrast, is like putting someone on a horse "and then frightening the horse into the wildest gallop" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 311-12). For a Kierkegaardian individual, authenticity is marked by internal disruption rather than buffered self-assurance, which leads Kaufmann to conclude, "[Kierkegaard's]

greatest value may well be that he does not allow us to be satisfied or pleased with ourselves” (*From Shakespeare to Existentialism* 203-06).

Applying Kierkegaard’s critique to Per Hansa, who has a high view of himself, reveals that Per Hansa’s self-satisfaction poses as self-reliance, which compromises his authenticity. Actually, Per Hansa is not self-reliant. Believing himself cut loose from the gods and kings of pre-modernity, he worships unacknowledged gods outside himself. Phillip Coleman-Hull hints at this exchange when he comments that Per Hansa “manufactures his own religion” in the form of land worship (108). Kierkegaard allows us to comprehensively detect how Per Hansa replaces the Christian God and faith with magic horns of land, wealth, and power; and more importantly how these undermine his self-reliance because they lead him to need things beyond himself to be happy. A Kierkegaardian rereading of Per Hansa tilts his desire for two quarter sections, for instance, from self-reliance into dependence upon land acquisition. The passage quoted earlier uses conspicuous descriptors of transport and enchantment, in which Per Hansa reacts to the land as if it were a spiritual power: “Per Hansa was transported, was carried farther and ever farther away on the wings of a wondrous fairy tale...A divine restlessness ran in his blood; he strode forward with outstretched arms toward the wonders of the future” (125, 127). Per Hansa’s land worship also explains why he feels so upset over the threat to his claim that he “could not have mentioned it to anyone for the price of his soul” (133). These reactions, and his eventual death at the hands of the prairie, recall Basarir’s observation that he thinks to become god of the prairie but experiences the reverse (99). His preoccupation with material wealth in the form of hogs and picket fences indicates more unacknowledged gods, needs outside himself that

undermine his self-reliance. The novel's description of his plow symbolizes this godlike quality of material possessions: "It looked so impressive standing there in the yard, with its seat reared high in the air...like a veritable throne!" (97). Finally, his need to outdo his competitors, although masked in the language of self-reliance, reveals his dependence on the unacknowledged god of power. Recall his statements to Beret and to his neighboring rival: "No worn-out, thin-shanked, pot-bellied king is going to come around and tell me what I have to do" (50), and "Then you and I will fight—yes, you and I!—for both the scepter and the crown" (355). In his quest for power, wealth, and land, Per Hansa believes himself to be perfecting self-reliance. Kierkegaard, however, assesses these quests as unacknowledged gods and Per Hansa's self-reliance as an unstable illusion: "Someone else [could become] the stronger, the more handsome, the richer; and this self could be changed, so that he himself became poor, ugly, powerless; and this change could come at any moment. Once this something else is taken away, he is indeed deceived...since the whole meaning of his life was founded on this something else" ("To Need God" 313).

In questioning Per Hansa's authenticity, a Kierkegaardian reading of *Giants* asks whether authentic self-reliance is ever achievable. Kierkegaard approaches this question by arguing for the human soul's bent toward dependence, the thrust of his thesis implied in his title "To Need God Is a Human Being's Highest Perfection." Based on the self's need for God, he concludes that buffered self-reliance must always rely on sustained delusion: "All other understanding that makes [the self] understand that he can help himself is but a misunderstanding, even though in the eyes of the world he is regarded as courageous" (309). In viewing the self as created dependent by God, Kierkegaard takes

an essentially Augustinian position on the human soul, which is relevant both because it accords with Rolvaag's Lutheran theology of the soul and because it reflects Kierkegaard's staunch Christianity. Kaufmann observes that Kierkegaard's person is often severed from his existentialism, yet Kierkegaard's "central purpose was to persuade modern men that the one thing needful was to become a Christian" (*Existentialism* 15, 22). Kaufmann also remarks that the agonized individual that Kierkegaard embodies is strikingly foreshadowed in the writings of Augustine (13; consider the agonized individual of Augustine's *Confessions*). Augustine holds that humans are created by God to be dependent on him, so the attempt to sever dependence on God damages one's humanness. Referencing Adam's original sin of pride, Augustine states, "When [man] had turned towards himself his being was less real than when he adhered to him who exists in a supreme degree" (XIV.13). In *Per Hansa*, this turn toward the self means that he prefers to think about himself and his own accomplishments more than God; e.g., he takes greater pleasure in imagining the picket fences he plans to build than in imagining God's glory. Augustine predicts that this focus on purely human flourishing eventually distorts the self: "And so, to abandon God and to exist in oneself, that is to please oneself, is not immediately to lose all being; but it is to come nearer to nothingness." In Kierkegaard's words, this life is a "delusion"; in Rolvaag's words, the human becomes an earthworm ("To Need God" 312, Reigstad 32).

Kierkegaard completes Augustine's thought by arguing that, if self-reliance leads to delusion and loss of self, dependence on God leads to fullness or "perfection." The highest state of humanness, or authentic life, is the realization of one's incapability that results from self-dissatisfaction. Kierkegaard thus reverses modern self-reliance: "With

respect to the earthly...to the degree that one needs less, the more perfect he is...In a human being's relationship with God, it is inverted: the more he needs God, the more deeply he comprehends that he is in need of God, and then the more he in his need presses forward to God, the more perfect he is" (303). Consequently, need for God effects both true self-knowledge and knowledge of God: "in and through this view *man learns to know himself*" and "comes to know God" (312, 321, italics Kierkegaard's). Rolvaag affirms this concept in his critique of Bojer's *Great Hunger*, for example, in which he makes self-realization contingent upon the main character's hunger for God; speaking of himself, he likens the "quiet, holy peace" he feels near God to a cool evening or a child resting against its mother ("Novelist" 65, Jorgenson and Solum 51). In *Giants*, this need for God plays out negatively in Per Hansa's journey toward spiritual and physical insignificance, which culminates in his extinction in the blizzard. That Rolvaag intended this theme in *Giants* becomes more manifest in its continuation in Peder Victorious, who advances Per Hansa's legacy in the succeeding novels of the trilogy. Peder Victorious meets his own extinction at the close of *Their Father's God* not through physical death but through an equally devastating spiritual and psychological death, which marks itself parallel to Per Hansa's by whirling dizziness, disorientation, and the voice of Beret echoing in his head as he descends into a mental freeze (*Their Fathers' God* 333-34, 338). Rolvaag's rendition of Per Hansa's death in his heir Peder Victorious, both men models of self-reliance, affirms Rolvaag's concurrence with Kierkegaard: Modern secularism has yet to demonstrate that self-reliance does in fact lead to authentic life.

Thus far Kierkegaard critiques the modern self-reliance of Per Hansa, but he also critiques the authenticity of Beret's faith-based dependence. As noted earlier, Beret operates out of a theology of fear rather than redemption, so much so that her preoccupation with shame and sin, as Coleman-Hull discerns, actually departs from mainstream Lutheran faith (107). Although Kierkegaard affirms Beret's awareness of human incapability, he does not affirm her perception of a punishing God who withdraws protection from his followers when they sin. For Kierkegaard the religious level of existence, which accords with authentic life in his thought system, constitutes direct recourse to divine power. Although the human self is capable of "nothing at all," God is "capable of all," and religious existence is fundamentally a correspondence with the all-capable God: "Thus a human is great and at his highest when he corresponds to God by being nothing at all himself" ("To Need God" 325, 310, 311). When Christ redeems an individual, that individual moves into correspondence with God and receives inner power and protection via relationship with Christ (Walsh 131-44). Put in Taylor's language of buffer, redemption creates a buffer for the previously endangered self, protecting it from punishment for sins, the wiles of the prairie, and other dangers that Beret fears. Kierkegaard describes this buffer as a life preserver, which holds up the swimmer in moments of peril as well as ease (*Either/Or* 58). Kierkegaard thus constructs a religiously buffered self that supplies the sense of security and agency which Beret badly needs, but which differs from Per Hansa's self-reliance in that its buffer is transcendentally sourced. This move complicates the modern/pre-modern dichotomy between Per Hansa and Beret and allows Kierkegaard to speak of agency in conjunction with dependence rather than self-reliance: "Should it mean nothing to him...that he, although he himself is

capable of nothing at all, with God is capable of ever more and more?” (“To Need God” 324-25). Unlike Beret’s spiritual framework, authentic redemption gives the redeemed security and courage because he “knows that God is with him at night when sleep refreshes and when he awakens in an alarming dream, is with him in the day of need when he is searching in vain for comfort, in the tumult of ideas when he listens in vain for a liberating word...in his anxiety when he is afraid of himself” (322-23). The difference between this passage, in which the redeemed finds comfort in God’s presence, and Beret’s fear-wrought faith indicates that just as Per Hansa is not authentically self-reliant or secular, Beret is neither authentically dependent nor Christian.

Modern self-reliance objects that Kierkegaard’s insistence on dependence brings the self nearer to insignificance rather than to fullness and authenticity. As Taylor explains, dependence on God imposes a transcendent authority over humans that the modern self considers repressive; removing it is one of the accomplishments of the modern age (301). Kaufmann implies this perspective when he objects to Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” as dangerously authoritarian, requiring blind submission at the sacrifice of reason (*Shakespeare* 176-84). In *Giants*, Beret’s propensities toward paralyzing guilt and psychological instability seem to suggest the same about the potential of the Augustinian view of the self. To Per Hansa, Beret seems to neglect or even oppose well-being, so he rejects her convictions as antithetical to authenticity. Kierkegaard acknowledges these kinds of objections but keeps open the paradoxical potential that dependence can fulfill the self rather than diminish it. While he outlines his defense of dependence more technically in “To Need God,” one of his journal entries poetically nuances this position and depicts a self left unwritten in *Giants* that is at once unsettled, dependent, and strong:

As I stood alone and forsaken, and the power of the sea and the battle of the elements reminded me of my own nothingness, and on the other hand, the sure flight of the birds recalled the words spoken by Christ: Not a sparrow shall fall on the ground without your Father: then, all at once, I felt how great and how small I was; then did those two mighty forces, pride and humility, happily unite in friendship. (*Soul of Kierkegaard* 43)

Implications

Poising Kierkegaard as a voice between the lines of *Giants* brings him into conversation with the frontier myth of bootstrap self-reliance, as well as with immigration and religious readings of the novel. The frontier myth has been rigorously scrutinized since Turner's time, but not usually through the route that Kierkegaard takes. *Giants* clearly questions the code of self-reliance from the angles of immigration and ethnicity, as recent scholarship has amply shown. Yet alongside these perspectives resides an intricate spiritual critique that has often gone unnoticed. The application of Taylor, then Kierkegaard, to *Giants* focuses these various readings' contributions by suggesting that *Giants* is fundamentally a query about the modern soul: Does modern self-reliance truly achieve independence and authenticity, and are these achievements an improvement over the pre-modern self? Per Hansa's and Beret's self-destructive propensities prevent both of them from answering these questions, and the subsequent irresolution in the novel allows for the persistent tensions between various readings that this chapter has attempted to reconcile. Kierkegaard directs attention to modern self-reliance as a problem because it hides unacknowledged gods and thereby leads to inauthentic life, yet he refuses to grant authenticity to modernity's precedents.

This reading necessarily complicates how readers see Rolvaag's contribution to literature. It sets up *Giants* as a model that invites more sophisticated consideration of immigrant theologies and of religion's relationship to ethnic and immigrant experiences

of modernity. It also affects how readers see Rolvaag as contributing to the frontier genre, since *Giants* confronts the frontier myth from the several standpoints of ethnicity, theology, and modernity. Such an approach invites fresh examination of the rest of Rolvaag's trilogy, particularly an in-depth analysis of how *Their Fathers' God* intensifies the modern/pre-modern clash between Peder Victorious and his Catholic wife Susie. Religiously, the Kierkegaardian reading sees *Giants* as disturbing the drift of its milieu toward secularism but also challenging traditional faith, by asking whether Per Hansa and Beret are as secular and religious as they believe themselves. Kierkegaard thus unsettles the complacency of both conventional religion and conventional secularism as inauthentic, which is what makes his reading valuable. Reinhold Niebuhr, writing nearer to Rolvaag's time, states in a chapter entitled "The Easy Conscience of the Modern Man" that one of the problems of the modern self is its complacency: No evidence to the contrary can "disturb modern man's good opinion of himself" (94). In this statement Niebuhr agrees with Kaufmann and, perhaps, the broader modern readership, for appreciating Kierkegaard to "not allow us to be satisfied or pleased with ourselves"—which is perhaps *Giants*'s greatest value as well.

Chapter Three: Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader* and Rural Race Materialism

"I was indeed a king."

- Robert Ball Anderson, *From Slavery to Affluence*, 56

In 1864 Robert Ball Anderson ran away from the plantation on which he was a slave in Kentucky and joined the Union Army. After the war, he homesteaded in western Nebraska. In a brief autobiographical account titled *From Slavery to Affluence*, he explains how he became one of the most successful farmers in his locale, concluding,

I have a good farm, well stocked with plenty of horses, cows, and farming machinery, with shade trees, fruit trees, grapes, berries, and have money in the bank to tide me over my old age when I am unable to earn more. A slave at the age of twenty, penniless at the age of forty-five, I am a rich man today, at least rich enough for my own needs. I have traveled in almost every state in the Union, and in Cuba and Mexico. (58)

Anderson proceeds in his final paragraph to state that his hard work has paid off, that he is not ashamed of his race, and that he "cannot help but feel that every one in Box Butte County, and western Nebraska, regardless of color, is my friend and I am proud of it."

From Slavery to Affluence is a companion in the small genre of African American homesteading literature to a better known text, *The Homesteader* by Oscar Micheaux. Remembered as the first successful African American filmmaker, Micheaux preceded his film career by writing novels, of which *Homesteader* became his first film. Self-published in 1917, the five-hundred page epic fictionalizes the idea of successful black homesteaders like Anderson. Inspired by Micheaux's own experiences homesteading in South Dakota, the novel encapsulates his plan for success through rural race materialism, or economic success through farming, a new gospel which offered to lift African Americans from poverty to prosperity. The idea of racial uplift through economic means was not original to Micheaux. What makes *Homesteader* unusual is the frontier setting

which Micheaux puts forward as the ideal space for racial uplift in the spirit of modern secular autonomy, as well as the ways the novel's protagonist Jean Baptiste tests and amends the experiment of rural race materialism. Baptiste turns to land and women to execute his experiment, a subconscious instrumentalization that allows both women and land to evolve into placeholders of his self-worth. Their paradoxical stature as instruments as well as goddesses in his mind suggests a re-dependence of modern autonomy. By pursuing such themes, the novel resumes questions posed in the previous chapter by Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, asking whether modern self-reliance is truly authentic. Yet it locates these issues squarely within the problem of African American selfhood which preoccupies Micheaux. Employing James Coleman's concept of African American faithful vision, I argue that *Homesteader* presents a permutation of faithful vision adapted by secular idealism to render blackness as spiritual authenticity, thus qualifying Baptiste's instrumentalization of land and women. As the novel launches and revises a doctrine of rural race materialism to reach this end, it encapsulates how African Americans navigated problems of racial uplift and modern individualism, thereby exposing tensions inherent in the concept of authentic selfhood in the early twentieth century.

Blizzards and the Frontiersman

The novel introduces Baptiste as the son of a former slave, who grew up poor in Illinois and came to South Dakota to claim a homestead shortly before the novel begins. In an opening scene called "Homesteader" after the book's title, he is hauling coal from a neighboring town when a blizzard overtakes him at sunset. The chapter's opening lines mark the setting: "The day was cold and dark and dreary. A storm raged over the

prairie,—a storm of the kind that seem to come only over the northwest. Over the wide, unbroken country of our story, the wind screamed as if terribly angry” (21). As twenty-two year old Baptiste presses into the storm, the chapter describes him as “vigorous, strong, healthy, and courageous” (22). He recollects how discontentment had made him go West, with only the heritage of “an indefatigable will; his firm determination to make his way; his great desire to make good” (24). Beginning to freeze, he reflects half-consciously on the “inevitable” civilization of the frontier: “Here with the unbroken prairie all around him; with its virgin soil and undeveloped resources; and the fact that all the east, that part of the east that was Iowa and Illinois had once been as this now was, had once been as wild and undeveloped and had not then been worth any more” (24-25). Numb to his imminent danger in the storm, Baptiste directs these musings to an imaginary dream girl with whom he habitually talks. So far only a “myth,” she is introduced as having arrived “in a day dream” after he came West, as being a sympathetic listener, as not belonging to the city, and especially as “good”—all characteristics which prepare readers for her upcoming in-person entrance. The chapter closes with Baptiste overcome with sleep and sinking into the snow; in the following chapter he is rescued by Agnes Stewart, a newcomer who stumbles upon his body and whom he recognizes as the dream girl.

The opening blizzard scene establishes the crucial themes for the novel: first, it places it in the frontier genre. The frontier is an anomalous setting for the race novel that *Homesteader* proves to be, but Micheaux’s opening descriptors of “this little empire out there in the hollow of God’s hand” (25) align unmistakably with mainstream frontier ideals that the historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously represented in his thesis.

That the novel begins with the archetypal prairie blizzard symbolizes the classic frontier ordeal, in which the frontiersman undergoes an ordeal to prove his resourcefulness and endurance. In Micheaux's opening scene the wind, as of yet unchecked by civilization, anthropomorphically sets out to destroy things in its way, and sun dogs uncannily seem to "vie with" the sun itself and win, forcing it below the horizon (21, 23). Fictionalizing Turner's statement that frontier conditions produced profoundly important characteristics in its residents (37), Micheaux indicates that Baptiste is fit for the test. Physically ideal for the frontier at twenty-two, six foot, and slender but not "too much" (22), Baptiste is also ideal intellectually, which he shows by confidently imagining a settled prairie in the face of the blizzard. Like Turner's frontiersman, who sees beyond "the rank, grass-clad prairie to the seas of golden grain" (153), Baptiste reassures himself in the blizzard by picturing a network of railroads to enclose the space in which he is currently lost: "As Iowa and Illinois had been developed, so could this—so *would* this also be developed. And as railways had formed a network of those states, so in time would they reach this territory as well. In fact it was inevitable what was to come" (24-25).

While the blizzard scene establishes the frontier genre, it conspicuously makes no mention of race. The absence of race markers in the context of the scene's explicit Turnerian descriptors frames the problem of race that becomes central to the novel. First, it makes curious proof of Kenneth Wiggins Porter's seminal thesis in his history of African Americans on the frontier: "They were there" (4). Porter's work challenged the assumption, both popular and scholarly, of "the Negro as non-hero and, therefore, non-frontiersman" (3). Subsequent histories of African Americans on the frontier focused on their roles as soldiers and cowboys and on their concentration in cities, but few

considered them as independent frontiersmen or in the specific iteration of homesteading. More recent research, especially the Black Homesteading project, has documented that black homesteaders were indeed “there,” focusing on the several homesteading communities in the Great Plains, including the Sully County colony in the state of South Dakota where Micheaux homesteaded (Friefeld et al. 18-21). A recent study estimated a total of 1,845 black homesteads in eight Western states, with a total of fifty-two in South Dakota (Edwards et al. 229). Census records show 465 African Americans in South Dakota in 1900 and 493 in 1925 (Quintard Taylor 135; VanEpps-Taylor, *Forgotten Lives* 11). VanEpps-Taylor’s extensive research on African Americans in South Dakota gives accounts of many “quietly successful” individuals in Micheaux’s region who filled diverse roles such as cook, janitor, mayor, cigar maker, hospital philanthropist, horse breeder, and stone mason; one went on to direct sports and dairy at Tuskegee (84-104). Five decades before Porter’s thesis, *Homesteader* contends that African Americans were also present in the genre of frontier literature. The opening blizzard scene introduces Baptiste as a classic frontiersman in a classic frontier ordeal but refrains from pointing out that he is African American, even though Baptiste’s racial identity becomes important as early as the next chapter. By presenting Baptiste in a frontier setting with no mention of race, Micheaux implicitly asks, “Why shouldn’t he be there?”

By introducing a virile protagonist in a raceless frontier, Micheaux’s blizzard scene opens a proposition about the role of the black frontiersman in American civilization: African Americans contribute to American civilization by mastering literal and figurative frontiers. Micheaux cultivated a lifelong interest in the ideas of Booker T. Washington, a fact discussed in more depth later in this chapter. In connection to the

ideas of Turner, Micheaux's presentation of Baptiste in the opening blizzard scene is made more interesting because of how Washington depicts the role of African Americans at the close of his study *The Story of the Negro*, published between Turner's thesis and Baptiste's novel in 1909. Although Washington's focus was never on the West, he borrows frontier imagery to envision African Americans' role in building American civilization. He describes their history as "the story of a great adventure," and depicts their progress in the following terms:

At the present time the Negro race is, so to speak, engaged in hewing its path through the wilderness. In spite of its difficulties there is a novelty and a zest as well as an inspiration in this task...In America the Negro race, for the first time, is face to face with the problem of learning to till the land intelligently; of planning and building permanent and beautiful homes; of erecting schoolhouses and extending school terms...In short, the Negro in America to-day is face to face with all the fundamental problems of modern civilisation, and for each of these problems he has, to some extent, to find a solution of his own. (400-401)

In similar language, Turner depicts the pioneer as envisioning "lofty buildings" and "jostling multitudes" arising out of the "dank swamp" before him; the pioneer is an "idealist" who has "the power of will" to make dreams true (153). By assuming the language of the frontiersman, Washington's Negro and Micheaux's Baptiste assert that they contribute to national civilization on par with other Americans, which they prove by their temerity to imagine extreme success in the face of overwhelming odds.

Washington concludes his study with the statement, "It is only by meeting and manfully facing hard, stubborn, and difficult problems that races, like individuals are, in the highest degree, made strong" (401). This claim, in conjunction with Baptiste's "indefatigable will," points to a final theme of the blizzard scene in addition to race and the frontier—the modern self. In my previous chapter, Rolvaag's protagonist Per Hansa exemplified the modern self that Charles Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* as

“buffered,” a conception of a strong, autonomous self that evolved with modernity since the 1500s (Taylor 37-41). The buffered self resists or discards traditional boundaries and sees obstacles as strengthening exercises rather than spiritual portents, a new way of seeing reality that Taylor terms “disenchantment.” Whereas the pre-modern self took a position of humility and dependence toward God, forces of nature, and other natural and supernatural powers, the modern self shakes off dependence and pursues autonomy or self-reliance as a better virtue. In the frontier genre, the journey into wilderness symbolizes the casting off of ordinary limits, often represented by the apparent boundlessness of the prairie or unchecked forces of weather like wind or snow. The frontiersman, in turn, undergoes the test to become a buffered self by “meeting and manfully facing,” in Washington’s words, the challenge of surviving and thriving in a limitless world. In Micheaux’s blizzard scene in particular, the blizzard represents the obliteration of recognizable boundaries, and Baptiste’s journey into the blizzard symbolizes his journey into modern autonomous selfhood.

Was modern autonomous selfhood available to African Americans in the early twentieth century? The position of the blizzard scene at the opening of the novel suggests, at first, a strongly affirmative answer to this question. Blizzard scenes appear more commonly as climax scenes in frontier narratives, through which protagonists successfully survive (as in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *On the Banks of Plum Creek*) or die (Rolvaa’s *Giants in the Earth*). Baptiste passes his blizzard test right away with the rest of the novel ahead of him, which seems to designate him as exceptional. In suggesting this hopeful potential for modern African American selfhood, Micheaux accords with African American manifestos of modernism in the twentieth century, which Craig

Werner and Sandra Shannon describe as “defiant, questioning, and ultimately empowering” and as “repudiating the masks of humility and sentimentality” in exchange for “a bold, stinging rhetoric of resistance” (252). They quote Langston Hughes: “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (255). Micheaux was largely rejected by the Harlem proponents of black modernism as a pulp novelist (Bowser et. al xxviii; VanEpps-Taylor, *Micheaux* 6-7). But Baptiste’s behavior in the blizzard scene actually embodies Hughes’s statement and shows that he is self-consciously modern in his claim on autonomous selfhood as an African American. Whether such selfhood is actually available or, more importantly, desirable for African Americans becomes questionable as Baptiste attempts to exercise selfhood in concrete ways.

Despite Baptiste’s apparent racelessness in the blizzard, the gap between his conscious ambition and his unconscious racial burden signals the unsettlement of his promising claim on African American selfhood to follow in the novel. The blizzard envelops Baptiste in whiteness, a racially laden visual that others have noted (Johnson 361), but the reason Baptiste finds himself in the blizzard is because he is hauling a wagon of coal. By pulling coal through a blizzard, Baptiste is also hauling a load of unacknowledged blackness behind him that “tower[s] above his head and shoulders” (21). Although the coal and snow are not explicitly racialized, Baptiste finds himself snow-blind and perhaps equally colorblind: As he drags his burden of blackness into the whiteness of the plains in an act of hubristic daring, Baptiste articulates his self-awareness as a frontiersman but appears unconscious of the racial heaviness of this identity. The coal and snow indicate there are more barriers to modern autonomous

selfhood for African Americans than it first seems. The American dream (and Turner's version of it) promised social mobility and equality to any individual with sufficient ambition, but as Gunnar Myrdal postulated in *An American Dilemma*, this creed reflected an "embarrassing" moral inconsistency in its unavailability to African Americans (lxx-lxxii). Baptiste's version of black selfhood in the blizzard looks exceptionally successful, but the scene hints that Baptiste will be forced to amend it—particularly since he is rescued by Agnes, a Scotch-descent newcomer whose implications for the burden of blackness are unveiled only in the conclusion.

Rural Race Materialism

The next significant scene in the novel occurs in the following summer. Shortly after Agnes rescues Baptiste from the blizzard, he comes to her aid by employing her brothers as laborers and her as a cook, since her impoverished family rents the adjoining homestead. In "The Administrating Angel," the chapter opens by commenting that Baptiste had never worked so hard as he did that summer. The paragraph moves from commenting on Baptiste's work ethic to his reflections on his race: "Notwithstanding the fact that he realized that less than fifty years had passed since freedom, they appeared—even considering their adverse circumstances—to progress rather slowly" (107). The following paragraphs lay out Baptiste's "ulterior motive" for going West—to use the opportunity that homesteading afforded to set an example for his race:

This land where four hundred thousand acres of virgin soil had been opened to the settler, he was about the only one of that race who had come hither, or paid the instance any attention. Such examples of neglected opportunity stood out clearly, and were recorded; and the record would give his race, claiming to be discriminated against, no credit...So in his ambitious youth, Jean Baptiste's dream was to own one thousand acres of land. (109).

This goal drives Baptiste's hard work, and he admits feeling tired to Agnes one evening. She responds, "You work too hard, Jean... You seem inspired by some high compulsion; some infinite purpose in the way you work, and in your mind this is so uppermost that you forget the limit of your physical self" (108). Baptiste compliments her perceptiveness, but he does not confide his secret reason for his hard work at this point. He notes that she had never been "so serious as she was that night... her eyes were tired and she appeared worried" (110). This worry anticipates the next paragraph, in which Baptiste is stunned by a horse kick and receives a concussion. Exasperated by the halt in his work, he submits to Agnes's insistence that he rest and to her assurance that her family will look after his farm.

This chapter lays out the vision of rural race materialism that charges the novel and inspired Micheaux's own homesteading. The scene reiterates two articles that Micheaux published in the *Chicago Defender* while he was homesteading in 1910 and 1911 entitled "Where the Negro Fails" and "Colored Americans Too Slow." Together with their parallel scene in *Homesteader*, they define rural race materialism as the achievement of racial uplift for African Americans via individual financial success through agricultural landholding and homesteading. This vision amounts to a new gospel for African Americans in place of traditional and ineffective attempts at racial uplift. As the phrase implies, Micheaux's vision is agricultural, African American, and material. First, urging readers that cities and the South are not the only place for African Americans, he calls farms "the bosses of wealth" and the west "the greatest and happiest place on earth" because of its agricultural opportunities; in one article he identifies himself as his county's "crop expert." Second, he asks why African Americans have

taken less advantage of homesteading than whites and other minorities like Swedes and Arabs, suggesting that “the Negro Problem” is lack of ambition more than lack of opportunity. Third, he defines success in economic and material terms, specifically of land ownership, stating that “White Race Will Run You Off Your Feet if You Fail to Get and Own Land.” One article ends with a clipping from a South Dakota newspaper that highlights Micheaux’s own success in these three facets: “One of the most prosperous colored men in the state is Oscar Michaux [*sic*]. . . He owns a half section of land and his wife is the owner of an additional 160 acres in her own right. Michaux has completed threshing 1,500 bushels of winter wheat. He also has about 250 acres of flax that promises to yield unusually well and give him a large profit.”

Before unfolding the obvious racial implications of rural race materialism, further comparison to Washington’s *Story of the Negro* reiterates this gospel’s connection to the limitlessness of the modern self. In an account similar to Robert Ball Anderson’s story, Washington narrates the success of an unnamed African American who became a tenant farmer in the South after the Civil War. After attending a Tuskegee conference, the man found ambition: “He began thinking about the land on which he was working, and a passionate desire to own and improve it took possession of him” (50). He started working before daybreak, and after dark he harnessed himself to his plow and had his wife steer him through the furrows. Through extreme labor, he finally acquired a house, two hundred acres, a sizable bank account, and stock investments. Washington concludes that “there were few men of either race who had the confidence and respect of the community in a larger degree than did this man, who emancipated himself in the manner which I have just described” (52). Washington attributes the man’s success not

to improved circumstances or opportunity but to an acquirement of ambition, much like a conversion experience. Like Per Hansa in *Giants in the Earth*, he became a Turnerian pioneer and a buffered self, which made him able to imagine success and overcome ordinary limits through willpower. Jean Baptiste and Micheaux's newspaper articles advertise the same possibility for other African Americans.

Micheaux's admiration for Washington was well-known, and he dedicated his first novel to "The Honorable Booker T. Washington." This fact has oversimplified how Micheaux's contribution to the debate between Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois is understood, which helps explain why his novels were written out of the African American canon for several decades. In regard to the specific question of landholding, Du Bois makes an effective case for why mere "gumption" does not produce successful landholders (VanEpps, *Micheaux* 47). When Du Bois asks a Georgian tenant farmer why he didn't buy land, the man responds, "*Humph!* Takes money to buy land" (463). Du Bois observes that the "car-window sociologist" sums up the tenant farming problem in the word "Shiftless!", but that the lack of land ownership had been helped by systematic misinformation and deceit (468-74). For example, he quotes a Southern preacher's wife: "Own land?...well, only this house...We did buy seven hundred acres up yonder, and paid for it; but they cheated us out of it" (455). Robert Ball Anderson experienced a similar theft in Nebraska that nearly cost him his homestead (55). Landholding, Du Bois concludes, especially of farms, is actually "transient" rather than permanent, which induces many African Americans with Washingtonian ambition to move to the city rather than farm. Additionally, Du Bois cites the arrest of a white man in Georgia for recruiting tenant farmers for a naval company, an example of African Americans' restricted access

to knowledge of opportunities and even legal mobility (467-68). Many African Americans “in those vast stretches of land beyond the telegraph and the newspaper” simply never heard of opportunities like the free land that Micheaux advertised. Even if they did, they would still need funds to move and purchase equipment, stock, and seed; and whites often strategized to prevent organized efforts toward successful relocation (Wolters 334-51). Du Bois’s iteration of the barriers to land ownership does not negate its importance, but he complicates Washington’s narrative of the man who simply finds ambition and succeeds.

Scholars have already parsed the implications of Washington’s influence on Micheaux and Micheaux’s role in the Washington-Du Bois debate, and the most nuanced treatment of the issue appears in Ronald Green’s *Straight Lick*. Responding to one of the most aggressive criticisms of Micheaux, Joseph Young’s *Black Novelist as White Racist*, Green argues in a point-by-point analysis of Young’s work that Micheaux revised Washington’s ideas (208-17). Green concludes that Micheaux did not imitate Washington’s ideas wholesale but rather identified with Washington’s example, while maintaining his own intellectual independence: “Micheaux did not see himself as having been taught, by Washington’s method, to sweep floors or to find and keep a job but rather as having been taught by Washington’s *example* to build an empire of his own, like Washington did” (216).

As Green notes, Micheaux followed Washington’s example partly by critiquing his own race (168). In an often-quoted statement on race filmmaking Micheaux remarked, “I am too much imbued with the spirit of Booker T. Washington to engraft false virtues upon ourselves...The recognition of our true situation, will react in itself as a

stimulus for self-advancement” (“Oscar Micheaux Writes on Growth of Race”).

Micheaux’s freedom in critiquing African Americans has prompted many to question whether he was prejudiced against his own race. Micheaux acknowledged this reaction in a 1912 article in the *Defender* and asserted that he did not wish to appear a “doubter” of his own race (“Successful Farmer”). Critics have parsed his potential racism even more thoroughly than they have his association with Washington, and Dan Moos offers among the most helpful insights in his chapter on Micheaux in *Outside America: Race, Ethnicity, and the Role of the American West in National Belonging*. He observes that revisionist histories of the west have rejected the Turnerian frontier myth as “inaccessible and alien” to African Americans and as “oppressive and whitewashing.” However, in constructing this reinterpretation, Moos argues that they inadvertently exclude Micheaux from African American discourse because Micheaux found Turnerian ideas useful (55-56). Voices like Micheaux fit into neither white mainstream ideologies nor into more liberating and inclusive paradigms, thus resulting in a new “carefully bound set of stories” in which anomalous voices are still excluded (10-11). Moos assents that Micheaux’s adaptation of mainstream white ideas remains problematic, but insists that it is worth studying for its opportunistic manipulation of dominant ideology for the benefit of the race. This approach admits what Myrdal stated in 1944—that African Americans had no choice but to concede to white rules of the game (lxxvi). Even Du Bois, by participating in critique of his own race, implicitly acknowledged such rules, although his tone differed from Washington’s or Micheaux’s (VanEpps-Taylor *Micheaux* 47).

VanEpps-Taylor suggests that Micheaux’s long-debated place in the African American canon is now a “moot point” (2), and recent discussions of Micheaux’s work seem to

concur in that they forgo the lengthy debates over Micheaux's reputation common in earlier scholarship (Cella, "The Plains Crucible"; Johnson, "Try to Refrain From That Desire").

The frontier on which Micheaux's writings map out his vision for rural race materialism was racially complex. Quintard Taylor agrees that the West was popularly seen as a space where normative racial boundaries relaxed, but, quoting Richard White, adds that most historians conclude it did not live up to this promise (17, 313). In contrast to Taylor, Monroe Lee Billington and Roger Hardaway state that the black westerner's experience was "essentially the same" as the white's: "The frontier generally afforded African Americans a substantial measure of equality, the freedom to live their lives as they chose, and the opportunity to become economically successful" (5). In South Dakota where Micheaux lived and set his novels, the Ku Klux Klan (one indicator of a region's racism) began operating for the first time around 1922, five years after *Homesteader* was published. It remained active in the Black Hills/Sturgis area in the western half of the state until the late 1920s, perhaps because of the location of African American soldiers at nearby Fort Meade, although the Klan directed most of its activity in the state against Catholics and immigrants (Rambow). Sara Bernson and Robert Eggers's history of African Americans in South Dakota reports one lynching in Sturgis of a soldier; it describes the attitude in the rest of state as "tolerance, if not outright acceptance" (9-11, 5-6). Micheaux homesteaded on the newly opened Rosebud reservation, where African American soldiers were sent in 1882 to calm settlers' fears about a local Sun Dance. VanEpps-Taylor states that the Rosebud reservation was one of the most diverse and racially inclusive areas of the Plains for African American settlers

(*Micheaux* 31). Pekka Hämäläinen notes that most of the reservation was sold to *Wasichus*, a term whose rough equivalent of “whites” shows just how complex the locale’s purported inclusivity was, since one of these “whites” was Oscar Micheaux (380). The same year African American soldiers quelled Sun Dance fears, a Mississippi resident asked a Bismark newspaper editor whether black homesteaders were as welcome as whites and received the reply that the Dakota territory was “broad enough to give them all a farm” (qtd. in VanEpps-Taylor, *Forgotten* 94). The high number of European immigrants also helped minimize racism against African Americans (96, 102); a Norwegian might view an Irishman as suspiciously as an African American.

Notwithstanding the relative inclusivity of the Rosebud, Micheaux’s claim locator confided that he had been told he was “wasting his time hauling a d--n n----r around” (VanEpps-Taylor, *Micheaux* 35). Despite this derogatory welcome, Micheaux was immediately introduced to the influential town leaders, the Jacksons, who endorsed Micheaux’s endeavors with financial backing multiple times (40-42). Micheaux stated that he “never spent a lonely evening” on the Rosebud, and the local Gregory newspaper congratulated him on his marriage in 1910 (64). Local newspapers also applauded his novels and heralded him as a regional historian and spokesperson, “one of the most ambitious colored men we ever met and he is bound to succeed” (84, 90, 73-77). One newspaper article described somewhat negatively his marriage scandal as a local gossip interest; all other extant mentions are positive (78). In an early chapter in *Homesteader*, Baptiste walks into town and notices the “conglomeration” of Germans, Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Poles, Finns, Lithuanians, Russians, French, and English. He identifies himself as the only African American in the crowd but states that “with them there was

no ‘Negro problem,’ and he was glad there was not” (64). In Micheaux’s mind, the frontier made good on its promise of relative racial inclusivity, which made it an ideal location for the vision Micheaux sets out in “The Administrating Angel.”

Micheaux’s vision of rural race materialism in “The Administrating Angel” raises the questions of race this section has just pursued, but it also resumes the theme of Baptiste’s dream girl begun in the blizzard scene. The chapter title identifies Agnes’s role as both angel and minister to Baptiste’s vision: She perceives and proclaims the greatness of his purpose and affirms it to him through the spoken words quoted in the scene summary above, and she helps him pursue it by advising and physically caring for him when he becomes injured. Baptiste, in response, “wonder[s] at her deep logic” and commends her: “You appear to see so much deeper than the people I have met” (108). At the close of the scene when he leaves her at nightfall, he notes to himself, “She seemed to sense his desire, and as he stepped out into the night, she extended it” (110). This scene prepares Agnes’s role as a ministering angel to become more sharply defined and significant in a future scene.

Preachers and Wilderness

Baptiste’s quest for secular selfhood begins with a traumatic childhood event to which the narrative travels backward. In the chapter “Memories—N. Justine McCarthy,” Baptiste recalls an incident when he was five years old in his childhood home in the region of Illinois called “Egypt” (163-73). Young Baptiste had helped catch quail for a dinner his mother hosted for several preachers, and sits appalled on a young teacher’s lap as the preachers devour the meat. When the attractive teacher shares hers with Baptiste, a preacher named Reverend McCarthy becomes irritated at his diverted

flirtation with the teacher and scolds Baptiste, “You’re an impudent, ill mannered little boy, and you need a spanking!” Baptiste answers, “I carried all the game, and now you goin’ eat it all and leave me none when I’m hungry. You’re mean man and make me mad!” His embarrassed mother takes him outside and beats him; when his father intervenes, Baptiste runs away into the forest. When night falls, he realizes a catamount is stalking him, but just as it springs on him, he hits it on the head with a log and successfully clubs it to death. His parents find him in the morning in the morning, asleep with his head on the dead cougar.

Before this incident, young Baptiste had dreamed of becoming “a big preacher,” but afterward he vows to “hate preachers forever!” (169). The flashback explains his incentive to create a new gospel opposite that which Reverend McCarthy represents, and it incites a contest between traditional and new gospels that the rest of the book pursues. In adulthood Baptiste reencounters McCarthy as father-in-law. After determining to marry someone of his race rather than his dream girl Agnes (a choice discussed later), Baptiste chooses a wife from Chicago named Orlean, who happens to be McCarthy’s daughter. As Baptiste recalls his childhood incident during different interactions with his father-in-law, McCarthy comes to embody all of the negative qualities that threaten his race in Baptiste’s mind (198, 238, 260, 268). Consistently described as evil, in chapter titles such as “The Evil Genius” and “The Preacher’s Evil Influence,” McCarthy represents laziness, cowardice, vanity, and hypocrisy, all qualities opposite Baptiste’s Turnerian ideals. A notorious womanizer, McCarthy openly keeps a mistress and steals another man’s wife, steals and sells one of Baptiste’s homesteads, and is actually a closet agnostic (299-304, 437, 369). McCarthy represents what holds African Americans back,

while Baptiste consciously embodies a “new secular example” that promises to uplift African Americans (Brown 137). He tells Agnes, “If I could actually succeed, it would mean so much to the credit of a multitude of others.—Others who need the example” (109). His name, Jean Baptiste, recalls the biblical John the Baptist who heralds a new and better kingdom than that of the Pharisees. Baptiste’s fellow settlers jokingly call him “Saint” or “St. John the Baptist,” with the broader implication that Baptiste proves to be a more authentic saint than Reverend McCarthy (44-45). Matthew Cella observes that “agricultural experience in the Plains is often cast in terms of a secular faith” (270), and although Baptiste’s gospel of rural race materialism is not technically religious, it exemplifies how homesteading amounts to a new faith for Micheaux.

Baptiste’s new faith comes into sharper definition against the background of his childhood trip into the wilderness, a kind of “lighting out for the Territory” in Huck Finn fashion to escape an oppressive religious authority. The wilderness in Baptiste’s traumatic memory foreshadows the frontier as a proving ground for his ability to become a buffered self. Depicted as boundless, with suffocating overgrowth and whirling muddy waters, its intimidation culminates in the “evil spirit” of the catamount, whose “red eyes shone like coals of fire” (169-72). Like his adult self, little Baptiste undergoes the test “calmly,” accomplishing the unlikely act (for a five-year old in the dark) of hitting the catamount midair in just the right spot. He overcomes normal limitations and passes the test, and thus the wilderness rather than the house becomes the ideal place for the autonomous self in the order of the Turnerian frontiersman and for the new gospel that Baptiste develops. Cella describes the frontier experience as a “crucible” in which one undergoes “conversion” and receives “salvation”; Baptiste experiences a conversion in

the crucible of the forest and emerges with a new religion (270-71, 286). The memory retrospectively anticipates his adult move to the frontier and instigates his vision of rural race materialism.

Micheaux was famous for criticizing and offending African American clergy, and while most analyses of his work mention this, few explore how his treatment of religion places him on a spectrum in African American literature. In regard to the presence of religion in African American literature, Laurie Maffly-Kipp states that African American experience is “anchored in a Protestant bedrock” (3), and James Coleman proposes that faith is one of the literature’s most predominant yet overlooked features (1). Maffly-Kipp and Joanna Brooks each comment on how African Americans have complexly adapted the religion of their oppressors as a “venue for creative and political agency” to further the interests of their group (Brooks 3, 17-18; Maffly-Kipp 4). In 1938, Benjamin Mays in *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature* proposed a spectrum of three sections for the treatment of religion in African American literature—traditional/compensatory religion, adaptations of religion to support social change, and atheistic abandonment of religion as no longer useful for social change (14-15). In his analysis of faith in African American literature seventy years later, Coleman affirms Mays’s categories as basically intact and organizes his own study loosely around them (5-6). Micheaux’s Baptiste falls between the final two categories. Unlike McCarthy, who is secretly agnostic, or Baptiste’s “infidel” English neighbor, who is both an atheist and a crook (49), Baptiste never claims atheism or agnosticism and occasionally attends church (428). On a walk to a Baptist church service, a friend asks him about his denomination affiliation, and he answers “amusedly” and vaguely, “The *big* church, I guess.” The friend then asks his

opinion of Protestantism; he answers that he has “considered it seriously” only recently and concluded that “organization is lacking in so many of the protestant churches.”

Comparing African American Protestantism unfavorably to the social effectiveness of Catholics, he asserts that ministers should be avid readers and then launches a discussion of education and school segregation (429-30). Interestingly, church cuts off the discussion: “And now we have come unto the church, and must end our conversation.” The fact that the service ends productive dialogue about social uplift in this episode signifies Baptiste’s broader view of the tendency of church, specifically the African American Protestant church, to halt rather than help social progress.

This brief interchange reveals that Baptiste considers religion favorably insofar as it furthers social change such as reading and education, but overall the churches in his purview of experience have a habit of ending such conversations. His view accords with Mays’s assessment of a trend “to doubt God’s value to the Negro in his struggle to gain a stable, economic, social, and political foothold in America...God is described as having outlived his usefulness” (218). Mays, Brooks, Maffly-Kipp, and Micheaux all examine religion for how it serves as “a useful instrument” (Mays 218), a utilitarian approach to religion which invites comparison to Charles Taylor’s discussion of “human flourishing” in *A Secular Age*: As secularization opened up new possibilities for living authentically, the option of “human flourishing” posited visible human progress in the present life as the ultimate goal, a view which originally included God but eventually led to a “sloughing off” of God as unnecessary (221-69). As the previous chapter discussed, Rolvaag’s Per Hansa gradually moved toward secularity as better suited to his modern goals, and Baptiste similarly moves away from traditional church as irrelevant and clergy

hypocrisy as oppositional to human flourishing. But he does not reject the actual concepts of God or religion, a fact which confirms Coleman's thesis: African American writers rarely reject altogether what Coleman terms "faithful vision"—belief in some form of sacred or supernatural agency that "saves the race"—although they might sharply critique or radicalize traditional religion (4). Alice Walker similarly states that the single aspect African Americans most retain from their heritage is the "belief that everything is inhabited by spirit" (qtd. in Downey 37). Thus, turn-of-the-century black writers, like Micheaux or Du Bois, could reinvent faithful vision into a relatively secular but religiously intoned ideal for African American human flourishing. The coherence of such a move becomes additionally visible in light of the influence of idealism at the time: As Toril Moi argues, the view that literature should "uplift" the reader and "point the way to the Ideal" remained a deeply rooted heritage of the era (4, 100-03). Baptiste's rural race materialism represents a vision for racial uplift that is devoutly idealist, and its development as a secular "faithful vision" begins in the following scene through the instruments of land and women.

Harvest and the Instrumentality of Land and Women

Although Baptiste takes an instrumental stance toward religion, his primary instruments are not religion but land and women. Perhaps the most important early chapter in the novel, "Harvest Time" opens with a classic rural harvest description just prior to Baptiste's decision to marry within his race. As Baptiste scans his ripe fields, the previously unbroken prairie seems to appreciate being tamed (131). As he gazes at it, he sinks into a reverie of calculation: "'My crop of wheat will yield not less than thirty bushels to the acre,' he whispered to himself. 'And one hundred and thirty acres should

then yield almost four thousand bushels. I should receive at least eighty cents the bushel, and that would approximate about three thousand dollars..." (132). He estimates how much of the "coveted thousand acres" his crop will enable him to own and how close he will be completing his example for his race. Startled, he turns to see Agnes behind him with his lunch, appearing to him in the "golden" light like "the Virgin Mary" (134). He asks her to sit down; she "obey[s] him modestly," smiling "coquettishly" and calling him "my lord." She praises him on the money that his crop will earn him, telling him that she "knew" what he was thinking from a distance (135). To Baptiste's surprise, she then expresses her gratitude for a favor he had done her family in secret, saving their family farm by extending an interest period on their loan. She weeps her thanks for his "act of a man," and Baptiste is so moved by her emotion that he confesses to her that she is his dream girl. Their mutual confession creates the effect of "an enchanted garden," and the chapter closes, "the harvest birds twittered gaily about them, his man's arm went out, and into the embrace her slender body found its way. His lips found hers, and all else was forgotten" (139).

Beneath the simplicity of the harvest scene reside the beginnings of Baptist's instrumentalization of land and women. French sociologist Jacques Ellul, in his critique of early twentieth-century modernity, defined instrumentality through the term "technics," a concept which brings to bear certain outcomes of Baptiste's vision. Ellul posits that modern instrumentality turns technical and material achievements from means into ends, or into "modern gods," a reconceptualization which produces two key results (51). First, it redefines and measures "good" in technical and factual terms (59-60). Second, it allows ideological and moral hindrances to be "got rid of" in the name of

progress (58, 70). Ellul's concern with modern instrumentality is that it becomes "imperious" in every sphere of life, such that it makes nontechnical critiques irrelevant: "You do not argue with an airplane which flies at more than six hundred miles an hour, or with penicillin"—or with one thousand acres (91, 60-61). Since Baptiste's gaze on pastoral fields produces whispers of awe in numerical terms, Ellul's definition of modern instrumentality brings to bear this numerical reverie upon an important Micheaux controversy. In a close reading of Micheaux's homesteading novels, Jayna Brown identifies the protagonists' "central urge" as "economic success" and "production" (138, 146). Joseph Young, Micheaux's most stringent critic, describes him as adopting a white worldview of "the imperialist of industrial expansion" (ix). While Brown, like Green and other recent scholars, resists Young's reading of Micheaux as "painfully reductive," she assents that Micheaux espouses a compromising materialism, a view which an Ellulian interpretation of the harvest scene supports.

Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence comment that Micheaux was more a businessman than farmer (8). In viewing land as an instrument of business, Baptiste participates in a trend in the early twentieth century to view farming as business, big business, a shift which Wendell Berry traces in *The Unsettling of America*. Although Berry does not reference Ellul or Micheaux, he applies the idea of instrumentality to the development of agribusiness in the U.S. in which Micheaux partakes. Tracing the mentality behind agribusiness to the discovery of the New World, Berry finds in early colonialism the seed for seeing new land as a resource for exploitation, a posture that developed into agribusiness's view of land as an exploitable business resource rather than something to treat with "respect and deference for its own sake" (57-58). This posture is

made possible by viewing the human self as “sovereign.” Berry says of the modern man, “His ‘success’—which at present is indisputable—is that he has escaped any order that might imply restraints or impose limits. He has, like the heroes of fantasy, left home—left behind all domestic ties and restraints—and gone out into the world to seek his fortune.” Berry is describing agribusiness, but his words recall several key ideas from this chapter: Turner’s frontiersman, Charles Taylor’s modern buffered self, and Baptiste’s lighting out for the territory, all of whom, in Taylor’s words, “won through” traditional boundaries to autonomy and invulnerability (301).

The effect of this triumph in agribusiness is that human sovereigns construct a manufactured “Paradise” or utopia (Berry 59). In *Homesteader*, this “little empire” takes shape in the network of railroads and grain cultivation on a grateful virgin soil (24-25, 131). Berry analyzes a similar agribusiness utopia in a 1970 *National Geographic* article “The Revolution of Agriculture in America,” which casts a vision for the “farm of the future”:

Grainfields stretch like fairways and cattle pens resemble high-rise apartments in the farm of the early 21st century...Attached to a modernistic farm house, a bubble-topped control tower hums with a computer, weather reports, and a farm-price ticker tape. A remote-controlled tiller-combine glides across a 10-mile-long wheat field...A similar device waters neighboring strips of soybeans as a jet-powered helicopter sprays insecticides. (qtd. in Berry 71)

The description in *National Geographic* accords with a much earlier text that Mark Storey discusses in a chapter on agricultural utopias. The 1893 novel *A Cityless and Countryless World* envisions a pastoral suburbia in which groups of 120,000 people live in eight-story buildings spaced at half-mile intervals around rectangular fields. Storey states, “Gone is Jefferson’s yeoman farmer, replaced by huge farms ploughed by ‘a powerful land locomotive’ driven by electricity—‘not a human hand [touches] straw or

grain' ...Ordered, geometrical landscapes are emptied of old geographical diversities, and even of labor itself" (155). The novel concludes, "Thus we did away with the solitude of the country and the evil effects of the city. We are all living in splendid parks" (qtd. in Storey 155). Fascinatingly, Micheaux develops a black utopia not unlike that of *National Geographic* and *A Cityless and Countryless World* in his next homesteading novel *The Wind From Nowhere*. In this novel, the protagonist Martin Eden stands atop Mt. Eden and envisions his land turned into ten-acre plots for "worthy and industrious" African Americans brought from the cities, who work in "food product factories" built on the prairie (335-36). Micheaux imagines his protagonists as agribusiness kings, who, as liberated sovereigns, virtuously complete Babel for the benefit of race and world. In contrast to the utopias of agribusiness, Berry notes the visible difference of Amish farms and explains it in the fact that Amish do not claim human sovereignty over land (99).

One of Berry's friends, an Amish farmer David Kline, opens his book by asking,

What are the lessons, if any, I wondered, to be learned from our way of farming? Is it a way of farming that preserves the soil, the water, the air, the wildlife, the families that work the land, and the surrounding communities? In other words, are we proper caretakers or stewards of God's Creation? Are we in harmony with God and nature? (xv)

Kline's statement produces a useful comparison to agribusiness utopian descriptions.

The distinctions that emerge between Kline's manner of talking about land and farming and Baptiste's in "Harvest Time" help identify a stance of instrumentality toward land, based on a rationale of human sovereignty in which Baptiste participates.

While Berry imagines the effects of instrumentality upon land, *Homesteader's* harvest scene suggests that Baptiste also instrumentalizes women. Feminist readings such as Brown's "Black Patriarch on the Prairie" and Johnson's "Try to Refrain From

That Desire” have elucidated the novel’s emphasis on masculinity (Brown, 140; Johnson, 366-69). But perhaps no reading has fully parsed the relationship between Agnes and Baptiste, which consumes far less space than Baptiste’s relationship with his first wife Orlean but proves more significant. Ellul observes that, because instrumentality knows no bounds, humans also become instruments (62, 51). In the harvest scene, Agnes fully expands into her instrumental role as minister and angel to Baptiste’s vision. Appearing as an obedient Virgin Mary, she praises his economic success and his masculinity (135-39): “You have earned it.” “It will bring you lots of money.” “It was so much like you, like the man that’s in you!” “[I] have known you now for the man that you are.” Baptiste responds, “You can say such wonderful things.” Determining inwardly that “she was his by the right of God,” he confides, “To have seen you that night [of the blizzard]... You didn’t know then and understand that I had dreamed of you these two years since I had come here: that out of my vision I had seen you” (139). While this conversation indicates mutual domestic love, it also implies an underside of instrumentality, since from the novel’s beginning Baptiste has sought a dream girl who supports his vision. The blizzard scene introduced Agnes as Baptiste’s aide; the harvest scene reinforces her in that role.

One lens for considering Agnes’s instrumentality is Susan Mizruchi’s “science of sacrifice,” a view which permeated social and cultural endeavors in Micheaux’s time, including racial uplift. Sacrifice ideology argues that the sacrifice of the part is necessary for the good of whole, particularly for “the maintenance of social order, the achievement of a certain level of culture, and the perpetuation of a certain kind of economy” (22-23). An extreme literary representative of sacrifice ideology in Micheaux’s period is Joseph

Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. While Baptiste does not approach the atrocities of Kurtz, Kurtz could be conceived as the barest form of the concept that helps readers identify it in milder forms. For instance, his relationship to the Intended makes a provocative comparison to Agnes for how an adoring female might pledge herself as a sacrifice/instrument for a greater cause spearheaded by her man. When Marlowe interviews Kurtz's Intended in the novella's closing scene, she speaks of Kurtz as Agnes speaks of Baptiste: "Of all his promise, and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart... You know what vast plans he had... I believed in him more than any one on earth—more than his own mother, more than—himself. He needed me! I would have treasured every sigh, every word" (115-16). As the Intended extends her arms forward, she reminds Marlowe of the other female who adored Kurtz, "stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream." The worshipful devotion of these females harkens back to the concept of human sovereignty in that they attribute a kind of godhood or ultimate selfhood to Kurtz, whom Marlowe describes as having "kicked himself loose of the earth" (100). Kurtz justifies his godlike relationship toward human instruments by employing the language of a greater cause, similar to the social causes Mizruchi names. On his deathbed, he remarks, "Show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability... Of course you must take care of the motives—right motives—always" (103). Recalling his research pamphlet for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, this comment indicates the close relationship in Kurtz's mind between a greater cause and personal sovereignty to rationalize the sacrifice and instrumentalization of other humans (who might give enthusiastic consent). Mizruchi notes that women often

serve as sacrifices and that even Du Bois implies at times that the domesticity of African American females might be justified in these terms (7, 364). Kurtz explores the potential of an ideology predominant in Micheaux's period that closely connects to the ideology of instrumentality, thereby suggesting an unrealized but real potential in Baptiste to instrumentalize and sacrifice humans for the sake of a cause. The harvest scene sets up Agnes as a virtuous, adoring female to become an additional instrument alongside land in carrying out rural race materialism. As an early scene, however, it represents only the initial iteration of Baptiste's vision: Just as Kurtz's self-sacrificing Intended is also a feminine ideal of inspiration, Baptiste's "Virgin Mary" assumes a more complex, goddess-like role in future scenes.

Miscarriage of Vision

While the harvest scene poises rural race materialism for apparent success, Baptiste's vision collapses with the miscarriage of his son by his wife Orlean. Immediately after the harvest scene, Baptiste had determined to relinquish his love for Agnes and remain loyal to his race by marrying an African American woman, Reverend McCarthy's daughter Orlean. Orlean becomes pregnant shortly after the marriage, and the chapter "Compromised" opens with her tearful attempt to dissuade Baptiste from traveling near her due date (252-58). Baptiste assures her that he will return soon and leaves for one of his distant homesteads to begin improvements. Delayed by weather and mechanical breakdowns, he is nearing home when a neighbor informs him that Orlean miscarried. Baptiste, stunned, asked if she had "attention" during the delivery, and the neighbor answers, "Yes, she had all the attention necessary. But I'm sorry for you, old man. It sure was a big, fine kid. She couldn't give it birth, so they had to kill it in order

to save her life...I went to Carter and sent her father a telegram as per a request of hers.” Baptiste continues home, stunned by his loss but more worried by the action he anticipates from his father-in-law McCarthy. He senses how his absence at the birth places him in a negative light, and the chapter concludes, “Jean Baptiste was compromised, and would have to make a sacrifice.”

The miscarriage of the infant son represents Baptiste’s miscarried vision of rural race materialism and amounts to a turning point in how the novel tests out and amends its execution of the vision. Blake Allmendinger states that it “disproves Turner’s thesis that the West is a land of new beginnings and fresh opportunities, or the site of symbolic rebirth” (550). The scene instigates the action for the rest of the book, in which McCarthy takes Orlean back to Chicago, where Baptiste unsuccessfully tries to retrieve her and undergoes numerous conflicts with his nemesis McCarthy. In a final visit, Orlean physically beats Baptiste in an episode of anger, and shortly afterward she murders her father and commits suicide. The miscarriage scene in *Homesteader* contrasts with the birth scene in Rolvaag’s *Giants*, an equally climactic and symbolic chapter in which Beret nearly miscarries. But Beret successfully bears Peder Victorious and Per Hansa names him triumphantly; even though Per Hansa dies, Peder Victorious carries on his vision in the rest of the trilogy. In Baptiste’s case, his initial vision of rural race materialism dies with his child, particularly the racial aspect of it. He had relinquished “his real love to be loyal to his race” (154), and even though he often refers forebodingly to laws against intermarriage, his decision to reject Agnes’s love ultimately rests on the racial aspect of his vision more than on anti-miscegenation laws: “He had set himself in this new land to succeed; he had worked hard and slaved to that end. He liked his people;

he wanted to help them. Examples they needed, and such he was glad he had become; but if he married now the one he loved, the example was lost; he would be condemned, he would be despised by the race that was his” (147). But instead of perfecting his example, Baptiste’s marriage to a woman within his race fails reproductively, catalyzes his downfall into disrepute with the African American population in his sphere of influence, and results in the loss of his homestead. The miscarriage scene forecasts the disintegration of his first attempt at rural race materialism, underscoring the burden of blackness that weighs down Baptiste.

Baptiste’s reaction to this collapse uncovers a development that complicates his instrumentalization of land and women. Facing failure for the first time, he becomes characterized by bitterness and despair: “In the days that followed the real Jean Baptiste died and another came to live in his place. And that one was a hollow-cheeked, unhappy, nervous, apprehensive creature” (316). The paragraph concludes by explaining that along with the destruction of his marriage, Baptiste intuitively senses oncoming physical drought, which destroys his crops and leaves him financially destitute. The helpless anger he exhibits in the face of these joint failures demonstrates how the adoration of women and agribusiness have become subconscious placeholders of self-worth. As he watches his crops die, with Orlean out of reach in Chicago, Baptiste feels resentment at his wife’s disloyalty and absence: “He saw disaster creeping upon him from the drought rent fields. Is it, therefore, but natural that in his moments of agony and unhappiness, shattered hopes and mortal anguish, that he should turn to the woman who had been his mate[?]” (324).

Bereft of a feminine administrating angel and of financial success, Baptiste's despair reveals the dependence he has come to place on land and women for inspiration and self-worth. He fantasizes about killing his father-in-law or himself and exclaims, "Unless I find some diversion, I will be unfit for anything but suicide!" (347). The narration continues, "The world to him was lost. The strong shall become the weakest when it becomes so, it is said; and surely Jean Baptiste had come to it in this hour. He had no courage, he had no hope, he had no plans" (347-48). Baptiste's inability to overcome anger and depression shows that even as he had subconsciously instrumentalized women and land, they developed unexamined into placeholders of self-worth. Ellul remarks that instrumentality has the potential to transform the user into a servant of the instrument (29), and Baptiste's acute despair demonstrates this possibility. It also suggests an additional parallel to Per Hansa, whose anger in the face of failure indicates certain unacknowledged gods, and who becomes mastered by the forces he intends to master. In Baptiste's case the figurative angels of land and women, like real angels, minister but also control; they could be said to evolve into secular goddesses upon whose benevolence he depends and whose desertion leaves him incapacitated. The metamorphosis of land and women from tools into goddesses qualifies and even partially reverses their instrumentalization. Ultimately assuming a duality as instrument-goddesses, they symbolize the ideals of "faithful vision" in Baptiste's rural race materialism, leaving him not altogether autonomous or buffered.

Irene and Utopia

Unlike Per Hansa's tragic end in *Giants*, *Homesteader* reverses catastrophe to produce a revised iteration of its initial vision. The turning point begins in a chapter

entitled “Irene Grey,” in which Baptiste visits one of the marriage prospects he had originally considered alongside Orlean. In contrast to Orlean’s father, Irene’s father, “the Negro Potato King,” owns an enormously successful farm in Kansas, and Baptiste is curious to see the operation as well as the girl whom he could have married (426). Irene is gone when he arrives, and her brothers are “just getting’ ready to go swimmin’. Wanta go long?” (417). Baptiste and the boys return to the kitchen as Irene and her mother and sisters are making supper. In a singularly intimate scene, not unlike Jim Cuzak’s arrival at Antonia’s kitchen near the end of *My Antonia*, the family teases Baptiste for not knowing which attractive sister is Irene. Irene takes him on a romantic tour through the fields, and as he “stroll[s] beside this girl whose father had succeeded,” he cannot help contrasting Orlean to “the one now beside him that he might have had for wife” (423). Unlike Orlean, Irene demonstrates familiarity with agriculture, an enterprising and ambitious mind, and interest in Baptiste’s homesteading project. The language and mood are languorous and almost magical, distinct from the rest of the book. Irene casts “the spell of her wonderful eyes” over Baptiste as he gazes at her: “Stretched there under a walnut she was the picture of enchantment” (425). At this point in the novel he is separated from Orlean but still legally married, so he resolves to cut short his visit to Irene “because it was dangerous for him to linger in her radiating presence without regretting what fate had willed” (431).

What does this anomalous scene contribute to the novel? It revives Baptiste’s faith in rural race materialism and in women and land, thereby restoring his self-worth and, more importantly, his ideals of racial uplift. The next chapter, which resumes the final stage of conflict between Baptiste and the McCarthys, states that “the

turning point in his life had come. At last manhood had returned, *and he was ready to fight*" (438). Visiting Irene is Baptiste's version of the glimpse into the Promised Land, like Du Bois's view from Mount Pisgah (438) or Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountaintop." Like Agnes and unlike Orlean, Irene is enthusiastic about frontier homesteading, and she also comes from a "Baptist" family that exemplifies a new kingdom of racial uplift (428). Since Baptiste eventually marries Agnes and not Irene, the scene would be confusing if it were not for one flaw on Irene's part that highlights the role women play in Baptiste's vision. Despite exchanging passionate kisses with Irene on the dark balcony, he concludes that she has passion, but not wifely love: "There is nothing so sweet in the world as to love a woman. But, on the other hand, mayhap all that is considered love is not so; it may be merely passion, and it was passion he discovered that was guiding Irene Grey" (432). Irene's passion would make her a good business partner, but not a good wife. This discovery "disturb[s]" Baptiste, and his reluctance to marry the competent but apparently unloving Irene reveals an important insight about the impact of idealism on his view of women. In the aforementioned discussion of human flourishing, vestiges of idealism were seen to work their way into secularized versions of faithful vision for racial uplift. Since "idealism required writers and artists to idealize women," Moi observes that "the result was a long line of literary women who sacrifice their life for love" (4). Frequently juxtaposed with "demonic temptress-figures," the ideal woman "prove[s] her purity by being ready to sacrifice her life for love" (4. 79). In *Homesteader*, the demoness is clearly Orlean, but Agnes emerges as the superior ideal to Irene because she adores Baptiste and is ready to lay down her life for his cause. Understanding this female trio as idealist types qualifies

Baptiste's view of women as something more than pure instrumentalization, identifying Agnes as the Virgin Mary of rural race materialism. In this light, the import of an incident in the novel's first chapter becomes clear: In it, Agnes dreams about Baptiste; the vision prophetically reveals his blackness and her attraction to this identity before she actually meets him or discovers her own racial heritage (19). Irene offers nothing to compete with this level of intimate investment in Baptiste and his vision, which equips Agnes to eventually transform his blackness from a destiny of burden to one of joy. The Irene episode functions as a bridge between this destiny and the sorrowful years with Orlean: After Baptiste leaves Irene unattached, a series of lucky events races back to the heroine and the novel's conclusion—Orlean's suicide, the paramount discovery that Agnes is partly black, rainfall in South Dakota and subsequent financial recovery, and Baptiste and Agnes's happy marriage.

This happy ending has garnered different critiques. Moos represents many scholars when he calls the conclusion a compromise, Micheaux's personal coping mechanism for the disappointment he actually encountered in his own homesteading and marriage. Despite Moos's advocacy for Micheaux's inclusion in the African American canon, he concludes that Micheaux's idealistic fantasy "lessen[s] the usefulness of his fictions for providing alternative narratives for African Americans" (74). Other readers adopt a middle ground, arguing that the novel's happy ending is a legitimate coping mechanism. Allmendinger states, "A subject's inability to forget a traumatic occurrence, combined with a psychological need to recollect the episode in a manner that feels bearable, results in a literature of 'double telling' that mixes dramatic distortion, and thus self-protection, with fact" (563). Allmendinger reads *Homesteader* as "the story of a

wound that cries out” and its happy ending as Micheaux’s reopening of his trauma and attempt to heal from and make sense of it through art. In one of the newest readings of *Homesteader*, Cella departs from the norm and entirely skips the debate whether the conclusion is compromised. His ecocritical reading of the novel concludes that Baptiste successfully emerges from the crucible of his experiences into a spiritual membership of place on the Plains. While Cella acknowledges the Turnernian conventions in the novel, he finds Baptiste’s and Agnes’s spiritual faith in the land to be the overriding quality of the book, which the happy ending confirms (275-76, 287 n14).

I argue that the conclusion, and by extension the novel, is made legible by understanding it as a secularized faithful vision. The happy ending sustains the viability of rural race materialism in the face of its initial failure by establishing land and women as idealist guides to African American flourishing. Baptiste’s materialism and instrumentalization endeavor to make the ideal of African American flourishing visibly concrete, down to the numerical measurement of a thousand acres. Since his dependence on land and women is not wholly self-reliant, it calls into question the authenticity of the modern self by asking whether its ostensible autonomy might sometimes be an illusion. In this sense *Homesteader* deals with the same question of unacknowledged secular gods that Rolvaag considers in *Giants*. But its conclusion also invites readers to consider whether authenticity can be found through racial identity, as Agnes and the land ultimately transform Baptiste’s blackness from a burden to an identity he genuinely loves. Blackness as authentic joy, a thing in jeopardy the entire novel, becomes possible in the end, which circles back to the full import of Agnes’s initial rescue of Jean Baptiste in the opening blizzard. According to this reading, Micheaux attributes spiritual

significance to African American identity not unlike that of Du Bois in the opening chapter to *Souls of Black Folk*, titled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”: “The Negro is a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world” (364). These implications make a compelling case for *Homesteader* as far more deeply entrenched in the complexities of African American selfhood than it has been given credit.

Homesteader represents one experiment with African American individualism on the prairie out of many. Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman grew up in South Dakota and became a well-known pastor’s wife and women’s advocate in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Her work was forgotten after her death until Claudia Tate published her collected works as part of Oxford University Press’s series of black women writers. Her poem “Lift Me Higher Master” provokes an interesting comparison to Micheaux on the modern self:

Lift me up higher, Master,
Above the things of earth...
Help me to scale the mountains,
Transfigured by thy love...

Lift me up higher Master,
Higher, higher every day
Fit and prepare my fickle soul
For its immortal sway. (135-36)

Tillman, like Micheaux, expresses a desire to transcend normal limitations and become a strong self, although she achieves it through dependence on a spiritual authority rather than through human autonomy. Her poem, alongside Micheaux’s *Homesteader* and Robert Anderson’s autobiography, represents the surprising range of possibilities from farmer-kings to church communities for flourishing on the frontier. Was modern

individualism available in any real or desirable sense to these African Americans? Texts like Micheaux's *Homesteader*, considered alongside other forgotten contemporaries like Tillman and Anderson, demonstrate the multiple ways that African Americans on the frontier actually navigated this question.

Chapter Four: Art as Religion in *Main Street* and *My Antonia*

In 1924, four years after the record-setting publication of *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis wrote a short sequel titled “Main Street’s Been Paved” for *The Nation*. In an exchange between Lewis and his now-fortyish heroine, Carol asks Lewis to settle the Thanatopsis Club’s debate whether Edna Ferber’s new novel *So Big* is the “*dernier cri* in literature just now” (312). Published in 1924 and awarded the Pulitzer the next, *So Big* is about a poor farm boy’s ascent among the Chicago elite. Toward the end Dirk DeJong falls in love with Dallas, a painter who represents a life of art and beauty and causes Dirk to reassess his elite life as a disappointment. In an important scene Dallas takes Dirk to an evening class at the Art Institute, where the crowded room is quietly painting a nude woman.

To himself Dirk said in a sort of panic: “Why, say, she hasn't got any clothes on! My gosh! this is fierce. She hasn't got anything on!” He tried, meanwhile, to look easy, careless, critical. Strangely enough, he succeeded, after the first shock, not only in looking at ease, but feeling so. The class was doing the whole figure in oils.

The model was a moron with a skin like velvet and rose petals. She fell into poses that flowed like cream. Her hair was waved in wooden undulations and her nose was pure vulgarity and her earrings were drug-store pearls in triple strands but her back was probably finer than Helen's and her breasts twin snowdrifts peaked with coral. In twenty minutes Dirk found himself impersonally interested in tone, shadows, colours, line. He listened to the low-voiced instructor and squinted carefully to ascertain whether that shadow on the model's stomach really should be painted blue or brown. (235)

Dirk’s reaction in this scene encapsulates a particular concept of art invoked in two other novels by Lewis and Willa Cather which inspire this chapter. Dirk’s experience suggests art, specifically an impersonal, detached aesthetics, as key to the inner fulfillment he finds so enticing in Dallas and elusive to himself. The scene advances the novel’s proposal of art as a new religion for a modern era, one that wins out over both traditional

church faith and secular materialism. The scene also cues Dirk's search for relational fulfillment. As he stands outside on the steps with Dallas after class, he feels a rush of intimacy as "the beauty of the night" overcomes him (236). Splitting sandwiches with her in a late-night lunchroom, he tries to believe that he and Dallas are finally bonding but realizes that while she is "part of all this," he is still a poser. Art provides new purpose in a modern age and enfolds its followers in community: Dirk sees this in Dallas but finds himself unable to break from his life of material prestige, and the book closes with him locked in the façade of his smart Chicago apartment alone.

Main Street and *My Antonia* take up the idea of art as religion as a starting point for increasingly complicated conceptions of art which they advance. By conceptualizing art as a secular religion, they engage a modern idea familiar to the early twentieth century. Toril Moi, employing the phrase that has become commonplace to modernism, notes how the "autonomy of the aesthetic" endows art with "transcendental value" (20). Modernists of the 1920s and 30s made art "the secular equivalent of a religion"; Moi references Sartre's hope to be "saved" by literature. In this construction of art, the artist becomes "a bearer of purity or authenticity in a corrupted world," similar to the reverence Dirk pays Dallas and the art class in *So Big* (103). Modernist aesthetics' positioning of the artist as a savior of humanity signals processes of secularization that were accelerating in American culture in the early twentieth century. When Ferber, Lewis, and Cather wrote their novels, the nation was feeling with heightened acuity the growing pains of secularization, particularly the loss of assumed cultural religiosity and the corresponding expansion of possibilities for belief or unbelief. Corresponding to this expansion were new ways to seek meaningful fulfillment or authenticity apart from God,

an ever-increasing range of variations that Charles Taylor calls the nova effect of secularization, which characterizes the historical landscape of this project. Art represented one variation made compelling particularly for how the autonomy of aesthetics offered restoration to a disrupted humanity. As Peter Bürger has explained, the autonomy of art paradoxically equips it with the ability to “put back together the ‘halves’ of man that have been torn asunder” (45). Cather and Lewis, writing in a period of rapidly advancing materialism and consumerism, engage this possibility of art as a savior—particularly for how it recreates fulfilling relationships, as the first section of this chapter will show. By doing so they entertain an important response to materialism advanced within an increasingly secular realm, which represents a juncture in this project: Protagonists Per Hansa and Jean Baptiste, in my previous two chapters, found forms of materialism to be attractive alternatives to traditional faith; faith was also the ostensible ground upon which objections to these materialisms were mounted. Cather’s and Lewis’s novels pursue an alternative to materialism not on the grounds of religious faith but upon art as a new secular faith. This pursuit epitomizes how new options for living authentically interacted with and often confronted each other in the early twentieth-century landscape I examine.

However, while Cather and Lewis try out modernist aesthetics as a way to live meaningfully, they exercise a measure of skepticism. Even the enthusiastic narration in *So Big* permits readers to question its description of a “moron” finer than Helen, an undertone of irony that Cather’s and Lewis’s novels pursue openly. Questioning the very aesthetics they find promising for humanity, *Main Street* and *My Antonia* each eventually move beyond the autonomy of art to suggest a more complicated relationship

between art and secular fulfillment. Carol's initial ambition to save Gopher Prairie and find true friends through art dissolves into disillusionment, and Jim's sense of relational authenticity finds definition only in his return to Antonia Cuzak's home. While these outcomes seem to suggest that both novels rise or fall on their protagonists' ability to find or make art, it is actually the quality of ordinary devotion to loved ones that determines their respective fulfillment. Ordinary devotion to loved ones produces the organic beauty of the Cuzak home where Jim finds contentment, whereas in *Main Street* the absence of devotion in Carol's closest relationships leaves her aesthetically and emotionally disillusioned. I argue that each text thus concludes that secular fulfillment comes through sacrificial devotion to loved ones in the course of ordinary, daily rhythms.

The novels' mutual shift in focus from art to ordinary devotion invites several insights. First, it reveals how Cather and Lewis are deeply invested in the ordinary even as they engage aesthetic ideologies. Liesl Olson argues that "literary modernism takes ordinary experience as its central subject," a reconfiguration which balances the emphasis on extraordinary and internalized epiphanies of self-discovery to which modernism is sometimes reduced (3-4). In *Main Street* and *Antonia*, ordinary, daily sacrifices of devotion emerge as a new kind of "final good," to borrow Olson's phrase—"the things we do every day, meaningful in their usefulness" (4). To explain how a turn toward the ordinary redefines life's higher good for a modern era, Olson quotes Charles Taylor: "The higher is to be found not outside of but as a manner of living ordinary life"—a parallel concept to his phraseology of "human flourishing" which I employ in earlier chapters (30). In a schema that elevates the ordinary, art no longer functions in an autonomous "art for art's sake" fashion but assumes the important role of recognizing the

ordinary as a secular good: “Art’s heightened attention to the everyday, therefore, may ultimately sanctify the ordinary” (4-5). *Main Street* and *Antonia* move beyond the idea of art by itself as a secular religion—and then beyond the idea of ordinary devotion as complete in itself—to ultimately suggest that art commemorates everyday sacrifices in a secular world that no longer assumes God sees and sanctifies such devotion.

By arguing for ordinary devotion as the subject of art, *Main Street* and *Antonia* make a case for the Midwest as a locus of the ordinary and, by extension, of modernity. Both novels are located on the twentieth-century American farm, a place which Janet Casey calls a “potent signifier” of the conditions of modernity (3). By epitomizing the ordinary, the Midwest farm in the novels signifies the modern search for secular fulfillment through art’s sanctification of the ordinary. Each novel contrasts the ordinary Midwest farm to Eastern metropolises of art and progress, effecting a reorientation of modernity to the rural which affirms an argument made by both Casey and Mark Storey: The rural yields important insights for the modern by means of its geographical estrangement. Casey links this argument to Rita Felski’s directive to reconceive modernity in terms of the subaltern: “The history of the modern needs to be rethought in terms of the various subaltern identities that have contributed to its formation” (212, Casey 20). The subaltern of modernity in *Main Street* and *Antonia* is the rural Midwest, specifically the farm as home to the ordinary. But even if the Midwest is ordinary, it is not homogenous. Cather and Lewis take care to show the farms of Minnesota and Nebraska as belonging to displaced immigrants, at once the most uprooted and grounded humans in the country. Represented by individuals like Antonia Shimerda, the Midwest

in these novels thus becomes a nexus of ordinary and foreign, stability and bewilderment, heartland and subaltern.

Cather and Lewis both argue for and interrogate this conception of the Midwest, the place where they insist that the self eventually comes home even as it eludes definition. Their scrutiny of the subaltern heartland therefore speaks usefully to us for how it “confronts the ideology of modernism on its own grounds” (Moi 23). While they robustly consider the autonomy of aesthetics that preoccupies modernism, they insist that a viable aesthetics eventually immerses itself in ordinary experience, or in Bürger’s terms, the “praxis of life” (49). Second, they maintain that the Midwest farm more than anywhere else in the nation can sanctify the ordinary. Finally, while they put forward the sanctified ordinary, they nonetheless view the “alleged promises” of any modern route to fulfillment as “deeply unsettling as well as potentially exhilarating” (Casey 11). My chapter thus concludes by analyzing the end of *Main Street*, a novel which conveys a particularly strong ambivalence toward its own hypothesis that art and ordinary devotion can provide authentic fulfillment in a secular age.

Artistic Vision

Cather and Lewis hold disparate reputations. Cather’s novels have achieved modernist status as “subtle works of high art,” while the definitive biography on Lewis reflects the hyperbolized but persistent view that it is “beside the point to approach any Lewis novel as a work of art” (Weber 149, 173). The novelists themselves maintained a longstanding friendship and admired each other’s work (Ryder 147). Both admired Hamlin Garland, distanced themselves from William Dean Howells, grew up in the rural Midwest, left and wrote about it (Weber 147). Lewis praised Cather in his Nobel

acceptance speech and told Cather that she ought to have received the prize (“Nobel Lecture,” Jewell and Stout 434). Cather had told him that she’d rather he had it than anyone else. A decade earlier, when Lewis promoted her as “Nebraska’s foremost citizen” on a tour stop in Omaha, Cather had written her thanks: “That you have read me and like me would in itself be good news enough,—but this downright friendly push from your strong hand, is something that touches and pleases me more than I can say” (Jewell and Stout 301-02). While Mark Schorer states that the two could have had little to say to each other, the record of their friendly interactions over the years suggests, in Ryder’s phrase, a shared “artistic vision” despite differences in style (Schorer 374, Ryder 148).

On Cather’s part, the vision is expressed in the abundance of her nonfiction statements about art. Cather’s statements align with the concept of art that Moi describes as characterizing modernist ideology, namely, that art assumes a religious status. Steven Shively and Janis Stout each explain how Cather fused art and religion from the beginning of her career. Neither an orthodox believer nor antagonistic toward religion, she was mainly interested in religion for how it gave expression to the aesthetic and how its language and experience could transfer to art (Shively, “Compatibility” 20-25; Stout, “Faith” 10-12, 16, 26). For example, Cather liked to start her day by reading the Bible and admired the Nicene Creed, but as Shively observes, she appreciated religious texts not so much for their doctrinal significance as for their “beautiful prose,” the kind that soothes one to sleep on a wakeful night, she says in a letter to her niece (Bennett 8, Shively 20-21, Andrew and Jewell 582). She famously states, “There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; thats my creed...its my whole self, not that I think I can do anything myself, but the worship of it. That is about all that life has given me: it is

enough...I think I get as much good out of it as most people do out of their religions” (Jewell and Stout 39). In similar well-known statement she asserts that “religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin” (*On Writing* 27). Less quoted, though equally interesting, is her exploration of God as an artist, a journalism piece from her university years that eloquently orders art and religion:

God does not teach morals...The nightingale’s song is not moral; it is perfectly pagan in its unrestrained passion...God’s nature is just a great artistic creation, and the zones and climes are only moods of a Divine Artist. In the northern zone He was stern and relentless; He heaped the cloistered icebergs and piled the black rocks in great promontories above the night-bound sea. In the temperate zones He was dilettante; He made green meadows and sloping vineyards...The world was made by an Artist, by the divinity and godhead of art...an Artist whose dreams are so intense and real that they, too, love and suffer and have dreams of their own. (*The World and the Parish* 117)

Cather concludes by deploring bad religious art, surmising that the “Master Workman” in the final judgment will choose not hymns or sermon collections (“we will be wise enough then to be taught by beauty alone”) but rather “the great classics and the things which should be classics, and the paintings that will make even heaven fairer, and the great tone melodies that must make even His angels glad, and the many lives that in themselves are art” (118). This piece demonstrates her vision of God as artist—better yet, art as God—in how she avails herself of religious language to communicate devotion to art. So far, Cather seems in company with Dallas in *So Big*, or with Sartre’s hope to be saved by literature.

However, for Cather, art brings an isolation that initially seems different from the relational fulfillment it promises in *So Big*. She writes in 1894 that the artist must “shun the parlors of his friends” and that “the fewer friends he has the better” (*Kingdom of Art* 142). The god of art demands the sacrifice of everything else: “In the kingdom of art

there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of woman who are strong enough to take the vows. There is no paradise offered for a reward to the faithful, no celestial bowers, no houris, no scented wines; only death and the truth” (417). Cather elsewhere compares this sacrifice to a marriage vow that requires the lover to forsake everyone else; the artist should be lonely (406-07). Yet, although Cather does not say so in these statements, the sacrifice is worthwhile because art eventually repays the loss of natural communities and relationships with better community. Kevin Synnott argues that Cather’s artistic protagonists generally lack relational fulfillment to begin with, and their exchange of community for art results in a better community in the end that is built on artistic vision (292). For example, Jim (not an artist per se but an artistic “disposition”) finds himself unfulfilled in his relationships as a New York lawyer, which prompts him to create an alternative and partly virtual community through art, which eventually brings him back into relational fulfillment. Synnott makes the particularly interesting argument that the artist, having become completely absorbed by his masterpiece, redevelops community through the viewer likewise becoming invested in knowing the world through the artist’s creation (296). Thus Jim becomes absorbed in his artistic vision of Antonia and seeks human connection through inviting his friend to become equally invested in his vision. The exchange of natural or traditional ties for more secure and resilient relationships through art characterizes a number of Cather protagonists—Jim in relation to the Cuzaks and to the novel’s narrator versus his wife, Professor Godfrey to Augusta versus his wife and children, Thea to Doctor Archie and Spanish Jonny versus her parents and siblings.

In fact, Thea Kronberg in *Song of the Lark* most closely parallels Cather's own development as an artist (Blackford 5); so while the rest of this chapter will focus on *My Antonia*, a brief look at Thea clarifies how Cather's artistic vision works itself out. At the Arizona cliff dwellings that inspired Cather, Thea conceives her defining vision of herself as a sheath; like the native women's jars, her throat is a container for art in the form of song (279). This experience shifts her view of singing as a talent perfected through hard practice to a view akin to Cather's statement "not that I think I can do anything myself, but the worship of it," in which Thea submits herself as a vehicle to art. And, as Cather's statements would have it, Thea shuns the parlors of friends for her art. Doctor Archie acknowledges the isolation of art when he tells Thea, "If you decide what it is you want most, *you can get it...* Only, if you want a big thing, you've got to have nerve enough to cut out all that's easy" (224). Thea proceeds to break loose from family and friends as she pursues singing, and as Synnott notes, this artistic sacrifice can seem selfish and destructive upfront (299). Synnott sees its redemption through the formation of artistic community at the novel's close, in which Thea's climactic performance brings together all of the people truly important to her—Archie, Ottenburg, Harsanyi, and Spanish Jonny (297). *Song of the Lark* is a more explicit example of what also happens in *My Antonia* as Jim's all-absorbing vision of Antonia proves superior to traditional ties like marriage. Thea thus serves as a clear, simple example of art as a religion that restores disrupted humanity, which *Antonia* presents more subtly. Cather later reflected that she tried too hard in *Song of the Lark* to produce what came naturally in *Antonia* (*On Writing* 96-97). The straightforward *Song of the Lark* makes the presentation of art as a religion which recreates relational fulfillment more easily identifiable in *Antonia*.

In the first pages of Lewis's novel, a pivotal moment constructs a similar bridge from *Antonia* to *Main Street*. As a senior in college, Carol Kennicott is revolving through philanthropic career plans when inspiration hits at last:

The supplementary reading in sociology led her to a book on village-improvement—tree-planting, town pageants, girls' clubs. It had pictures of greens and garden-walls in France, New England, Pennsylvania...she suddenly stopped fidgeting. She strode into the book...“That's what I'll do after college! I'll get my hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful. Be an inspiration...Nobody has done anything with these ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make 'em put in a village green, and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street!” (7-8)

Diane Shaw places this vision, which drives the novel, in the historical context of the village improvement movement spreading nationwide at the time. Shaw's analysis of village improvement in the novel helps relate *Main Street*'s artistic vision to Cather's. First, village improvement believes in art's potential to build community, or in Burger's phrase, to put humanity back together. Similar to the artistic communities created by Cather's protagonists, village improvement aimed not just to beautify physical spaces but to build community spirit through the effort. Inspired by the belief that “better places made better people, who in turn made better places,” village improvement provided “opportunities for a community to cooperate on a civic project and in doing so strengthen and perpetuate community bonds” (93). Villagers knew that aesthetics were not enough to keep small towns alive in the face of modern city lure, so the improvement movement emphasized cooperative spirit: “Improvement would rebuild the village, but the cooperative spirit would rebuild the villager” (98)—somewhat like the community spirit built among Thea's friends by her performance. Second, village improvement became “a new civic religion” (94). Nationwide around 1900-1925, the movement spread a

“gospel” of social uplift through aesthetic improvement. The function of village improvement as a secular religion is the second link to Cather’s artistic vision, which sees art as a religion. Like Cather, Carol expresses ambivalence toward organized religion but reverence for art (68-69, 230-31). And as the following paragraph will show, Carol’s assessment of her environment evokes Cather’s religious language of aesthetics.

Carol launches her artistic vision of village improvement by marrying Will Kennicott, a country doctor from the small Minnesota town Gopher Prairie. David McGuire states that the typical Lewis hero expects the “produce of his creative endeavors” to be participation in community (70), and Carol agrees to marriage (an intimate form of community) precisely because she believes it will facilitate her aesthetic vision. Standoffish toward the man himself, she finally commits when Kennicott shows her photographs of Gopher Prairie: “A sagging woman with tight-drawn hair, and a baby bedraggled, smeary, glorious-eyed... ‘Look at that scared baby! Needs some woman with hands like yours. Waiting for you!’ ... ‘Oh, it would be sweet to help him—so sweet.’ As his arms moved toward her she answered all her doubts with, ‘Sweet, so sweet’” (21). It is significant that Carol is unfulfilled in her banal urban life when Kennicott convinces her to move to Gopher Prairie “to boss us” (20). When Kennicott meets her, she is already a lonely old-maid librarian in Saint Paul, having “slowly confessed that she was not visibly affecting lives” (13). The cliché party where she meets Kennicott represents her life in general: Books about “Hindu recipes for curry, voyages to the Solomon Isles, theosophy with modern American improvements, treatises upon success in the real-estate business. She took walks, and was sensible about shoes and diet. And never did she feel

that she was living” (14). The superficial loneliness of the city predisposes her to resurrect her village improvement vision in Gopher Prairie by marrying Will.

Ordinary Devotion

Thus far I have introduced how Lewis and Cather both take up art as a possibility for finding fulfillment in a secular age, in Carol’s gospel of village improvement and in Cather’s nonfiction statements and Thea Kronberg. I now turn to the second part of my argument, which is that *Main Street* and *Antonia* complicate this formula to suggest rhythms of ordinary devotion as a new higher good—art now playing the important role of noticing and sanctifying such everyday sacrifices. *Main Street* initiates this shift through Carol’s failure to implement the village improvement gospel in Gopher Prairie. The first sections of the novel cycle through Carol’s various attempts to improve the town and make friends by doing it, and the largest of these is the theater production of “The Girl From Kankakee”—in which village improvement also meets its largest defeat. Quickly wearied of monotony in Gopher Prairie, Carol attends a play in the Cities. The ideology of an autonomous aesthetics, in which uncontaminated art rescues one from the ordinary, is revealed in how she fixates on the not-ordinary in the production—elephants, men with crimson beards, “Tyrian stuffs of topaz and cinnabar” (222). She mourns Main Street’s lack of the exotic: “Never, not all her life, would she behold jungles and the tombs of kings. There were strange things in the world, they really existed; but she would never see them.” The solution: “She would create them in plays!” The following chapters chart Carol’s “religious fervor” to bring the not-ordinary to Gopher Prairie as it clashes with the ordinariness of her acquaintances, who vote to put on the decidedly unexotic production “The Girl From Kankakee” (223-225). Carol, on the other hand,

intends not only to save the town from ordinariness but simultaneously to find personal relational fulfillment through the community spirit of putting on a play. When actors complain about her directing, her response invites them to share the worship of art as a sacred experience: “I wonder if I can explain what I mean?”...She was curiously exalted; her voice was strained... ‘I wonder if you can understand the ‘fun’ of making a beautiful thing, the pride and satisfaction of it, and the holiness!’” (230). To her dismay, Carol fails on both counts. Hopeful until the curtain rises that she will “convert Gopher Prairie to conscious beauty,” Carol realizes as the first actor “creep[s]” onto the stage that “it was a bad play abominably acted,” and the newspaper’s enthusiastic review confirms that the town is not even aware of it (230-31). Second, the play fails to connect Carol relationally to fellow worshippers of art. In the intermission she tries to rally the actors, “How many of you will pledge yourselves to start in with me, right away, tomorrow, and plan for another play?” (234). The lead actress’s blank “one’s enough for a while” tells Carol “how completely she had failed.” After the play, Carol withdraws into a state of internal exile that marks the next several years, in which “the event unchronicled, undiscussed, but supremely controlling, was her slow admission of longing to find her own people” (237).

Rejected by the town, Carol retrieves an autonomy of exotic aesthetics at a deeper level during her exile. An apprentice tailor moves to Gopher Prairie; spotting him in church, Carol immediately realizes Erik Valborg represents all that her townspeople and husband lack: “Across the aisle, two rows back, was a strange young man who shone among the cud-chewing citizens like a visitant from the sun...His lips startled her. The lips of men in Gopher Prairie are flat in the face, straight and grudging. The stranger’s

mouth was arched, the upper lip short...He was a poet. Keats was in his face” (338). Erik’s friendship provides her the relational fulfillment revolving around art that she sought unsuccessfully in Kennicott and Gopher Prairie. Erik comprehends Carol; on a solitary autumn boat ride she fantasizes about curling up in the leaves, and she identifies a newfound fulfillment in how he understands her whimsy: “He circled her waist with a brusque arm. She did not resist...in him, in the personality flowing from him, she was unreasoningly content” (366). However, the easy progression of their relationship is disrupted when Carol rejects Erik’s advances for reasons not altogether clear. Erik kisses Carol for the first time when the two are safely alone in her bedroom—a perfect opportunity, yet the instant he kisses her “she knew that it was impossible” (376). Startling them both by her resistance, Carol tries to explain that Erik needs to leave Gopher Prairie to realize his artistic genius (“Sell beautiful cottons—caravans from China—”) rather than become entangled with her, but neither is fully persuaded by her excuse. Erik repeats his advances at a later point with a love poem, but Carol feels “a haggard beauty in the lowering night” and “impersonally noted how bad a verse it was” (399). When she receives a note from Erik telling her of his departure for “New York or Chicago” to do “big things” for her sake, she eyes Kennicott with new interest and “for the first time in years they were lovers” (406). Her near-affair with Erik had seemed to indicate that art might really deliver what she wanted, a mutual worship of the non-ordinary which yields relational fulfillment. Carried out at a much more intimate level than “The Girl From Kankakee,” its unexpected end by her own hand signals a deepening ambivalence toward her own ideology.

As Carol's faith in her ideology lessens, Kennicott emerges as a standard of ordinary devotion. While Carol's "elephants with golden howdahs" represent her love of the autonomous exotic (430), Kennicott represents what Cather calls the modern yacht. Describing art, Cather contrasts "rich ornamentation; like the splendor one might find on a Chinese junk, gorgeously gilded and painted" to a modern yacht: "There is no ornamentation at all; our whole sensation of pleasure in watching a yacht under sail comes from the fact that every line of the craft is designed for one purpose, that everything about it furthers that purpose, so that it has an organic, living simplicity and directness" (*On Writing* 58). In *Main Street* Carol's love of the exotic is the junk, while Kennicott is the yacht. A country physician who appears supremely ordinary in Carol's eyes, his everyday devotion to his patients suggests a third way toward secular fulfillment that is neither Carol's art for art's sake nor the Main Street materialism she resists. Affectionate but careless as a husband (a fact discussed shortly), Kennicott as a physician is characterized by steady, uncalculating commitment: "A step on the wooden porch, heard through the confusion of sleep...Kennicott muttering 'Gol darn it' but patiently creeping out of bed, remembering to draw the covers up to keep her warm...He went out, hungry, chilly, unprotesting" (181-83). The scene which best shows his devotion, of which Dickstein says "nothing in the novel is more warmly imagined and beautifully written," is his performance of an emergency amputation on a German farmer. The eight-page passage spotlights Kennicott as a brilliant and resourceful surgeon, but his rapport with his German patients surprises Carol as much as his professional competency. Despite her perception of him as an ignorant all-American, he reassures his patient and directs the operation in broken but effective German: "Well, well, Adolph, have to fix

you up, eh?’ Quietly, to the wife, ‘*Hat die drug store my schwartze bag hier geschickt?...*Now, now, Adolph, take it easy. This won’t hurt you a bit. Put you all nice and asleep and it won’t hurt a bit. *Schweig’ mal! Bald schlaft man grat wie ein Kind. So! So! Bald geht’s besser!*’¹ (195-97). Carol realizes, “He speaks a vulgar, common, incorrect German of life and death and birth and the soil. I read the French and German of sentimental lovers and Christmas garlands. And I thought that it was I who had the culture!” (198).

As Carol acknowledges, what stands out in this scene is the ordinary—in Kennicott’s perception of himself, more than in the farmers and soil. As Kennicott unwraps the blood-soaked arm and Carol is overcome by nausea, she realizes that “with no hospital facilities, yet with no worry about it, her husband—*her husband*—was going to perform a surgical operation, that miraculous boldness of which one read in stories about famous surgeons” (196). He directs the farmer’s wife to hold the lamp, “*Hier, und dieses—dieses lamp halten—so!*”² and “by that streaky glimmer he worked, swiftly, at ease” (197). When Carol murmurs, “Oh, you *are* wonderful!” he responds with surprise, “Why, this is a cinch...Now last week I had a case with an ooze in the peritoneal cavity, and by golly if it wasn’t a stomach ulcer that I hadn’t suspected” (197-98, 200). He adds that his assistant had sent the wrong anesthesia: “Only thing that’s bothered me was the chance the ether fumes might explode...especially with that lamp right by the table. But I had to operate, of course—wound chuck-full of barnyard filth” (200). Carol asks in shock, “You knew all the time that—Both you and I might have been blown up?” “Sure, didn’t you? Why, what’s the matter?” As this exchange demonstrates, Carol’s

perception of the event as exotic comes into juxtaposition with Kennicott's perception of the event, and of himself in it, as ordinary.

Kennicott's carriage as a surgeon transforms him in Carol's eyes from unremarkable to heroic, but what might be easily overlooked is that this transformation occurs not in town but on a farm. In Gopher Prairie Carol finds Kennicott boring, but Lewis moves the couple beyond the borders of the town to the farm of German immigrants (Kennicott's regular patients) to enact Kennicott's transformation. The shift from town to farm represents a consistent geography throughout the novel, for the several times Carol and Kennicott interact in farm country always effect similar transformations (59-61, 152). Lewis's favorable presentation of the farm, particularly the immigrant farm characteristic of the Midwest at that time, hearkens back to this chapter's claim: The Midwest farm sacralizes the ordinary as a new higher good and source of fulfillment. An early scene in the novel establishes this theme by contrasting the landscape of the farm to the landscape of Gopher Prairie. While the landscape of the town appears to Carol "a jungle of stained table-cloths and catsup bottles" (36), the equally ordinary details of the farm landscape renew rather than discourage her: "Mounds of straw, and wheatstacks like bee-hives, stood out in startling rose and gold. As the vast girdle of crimson darkened, the fulfilled land became autumnal in deep reds and browns...Cattle came in a long line up to the barred gates of farmyards, and over the resting land was a dark glow" (61). The tranquility of this passage collaborates with the later amputation to demonstrate the nexus of stability and disorientation on the Midwest immigrant farm. The amputation scene presents, figuratively and literally, languages and limbs broken and lost, yet somehow the disjointed kitchen is where humans act at their fullest. The earlier

sunset scene explicitly describes the immigrants' farmland as "fulfilled"; there Carol discovers "the dignity and greatness which had failed her in Main Street." The amputation scene intensifies this experience of fulfillment in Kennicott's sacrificial devotion to his patients and in the farmers' paradoxical sturdiness and fragility. As these scenes together show, the Midwest immigrant farm sacralizes an ordinary more profound than either Carol's exotic or Main Street's banality.

Returning to Cather's metaphor of the yacht, the farm thereby reopens the door to art. As the yacht becomes artistic by fulfilling its normal purpose, the farm (and Kennicott on it) invites art to appreciate the fulfillment it offers in everyday rhythms and sacrifices. But as Cather implies, the yacht requires a watcher who finds pleasure in its function; the watching makes the yacht art, and this artistic attention, as Olson states, sanctifies the ordinary. When the ordinary rises to the level of a new higher good, which Taylor describes as part of secularization, then God no longer sanctifies everyday sacrifices as holy. This vacancy invites the artist to act as a secular priest who acknowledges the ordinary as good and affirms it as a source of fulfillment. Thus Carol functions in the amputation scene: By acknowledging Kennicott's ordinary devotion, she sanctifies it as meaningful. Her role in the passage is to mark the event as an event:

She caught the scene as a whole: the cavernous kitchen, two milk-cans a leaden patch by the wall, hams dangling from a beam, bars of light at the stove door, and in the center, illuminated by a small glass lamp held by a frightened stout woman, Dr. Kennicott bending over a body which was humped under a sheet—the surgeon, his bare arms daubed with blood, his hands, in pale-yellow rubber gloves, loosening the tourniquet, his face without emotion save when he threw up his head and clucked at the farmwife, "Hold that light steady just a second more—noch blos em wenig."³ (197-98, my emphasis)

Although Kennicott has been performing operations all along, they become visible only when Carol observes, and Kennicott's everyday devotion becomes heroic only when

Carol “worships” it (198). Carol’s role as a secular priestess of the ordinary is similar to a memorable line in Ferber’s *So Big*. When Dirk’s mother rides out into the farms beyond Chicago for the first time, she ejaculates on the beauty of the cabbage fields. The astonished farmer reiterates, “Cabbages is beautiful!”—a sentence his mind proceeds to turn over in vast private amusement the rest of the ride (17). Just as cabbages became beautiful when Selina said so, Carol sanctifies the ordinary of the farm as a secular higher good and source of fulfillment.

Turning now to *My Antonia*, the Christmas scene in the first part of that novel serves a similar function. It would be easy to read this scene as primarily about art (Shively, “Compatibility” 31-32), but parallel to Kennicott’s amputation, the power of the scene lies in ordinary acts of devotion. Jim and Grandmother labor over a picture book for Yulka and Antonia, Grandma prepares presents for the Shimerdas which Jake delivers, Otto writes his mother, and Jake conspires to surprise Jim with a tree for his first Christmas as an orphan in Nebraska: “He used to help my father cut Christmas trees for me in Virginia, and he had not forgotten how much I liked them” (54-58). These inconspicuous acts of care make the homemade Christmas meaningful, and Jake and Otto particularly stand out in this respect given that they are not family members. Jim notices their “unprotected faces” as they work on Christmas decorations at the table, wondering at the irony of Otto’s lot as an unmarried drifter, “Yet he was so fond of children!” (56). An enchantingly artistic character with his scar, mustache, and undraped angels, Otto more importantly acts as a big brother to Jim when he pulls Jim aside to confide the secret of his pony, teaches him to lasso, or shows him the treasures of his trunk (8, 12). When Jake and Otto go West, Jim states, “Those two fellows had been faithful to us

through sun and storm, had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world. With me they had been like older brothers; had restrained their speech and manners out of care for me, and given me so much good comradeship” (98). Similar to Kennicott in their devotion to non-family, Jake and Otto are arguably the most memorable characters in the Christmas scene and reinforce the primacy of ordinary devotion in the scene’s meaning.

Jim’s tree, a literal art piece, serves as the visual focal point of the scene, but its artistic power lies not in its aesthetic autonomy but in the relational cohesion it symbolizes. In its contributions from various members—Jake’s inspiration and labor and pocket mirror, Grandmother’s gingerbread and popcorn, Otto’s candle sockets and Austrian figurines—it becomes an icon for the members’ devotedness to one another; or as Shively says, the individual parts meld into one special communal experience (*Antonia* 55-56; Shively, “Parables” 57). Yet art still plays the important role of sanctifying the ordinary devotion the tree symbolizes. Similar to Carol’s function in the amputation scene, Mr. Shimerda, an artist in both vocation and temperament, appreciates the tree and thereby lends it significance: “Mr. Shimerda rose, crossed himself, and quietly knelt down before the tree...There had been nothing strange about the tree before, but now, with someone kneeling before it—images, candles...” (59). Mr. Shimerda thus sanctifies the ordinariness of the tree, a pronouncement which determines the effect of the scene as a whole. The scene contrasts with Carol’s first Christmas in Gopher Prairie, which lacks devotion for Carol to sanctify even though she stands ready as an artist. Carol attempts to reenact her late father’s Christmases in “the rites of the morning, in the tree she had decorated, the three stockings she had hung, the ribbons and gilt seals and hidden

messages” (200-01). What Carol does not realize is that these artistic rituals held meaning only because they represented her father’s devotion to her. When Kennicott acts uninvested and she escapes upstairs to weep in the bathtub, she does not recognize that marital uncertainty rather than unappreciated decorations causes tears on her newlywed Christmas (Chaleila 10). The Christmas scenes in both novels could be read primarily for how they lack or create art, but the presence or absence of art actually serves to signify the presence or absence of devotion to loved ones.

Antonia’s Christmas scene foreshadows Antonia Cuzak’s family, who most clearly demonstrate the relationship between ordinary devotion and art in the novel. Linking the two sections, Daryl Palmer notes that both the Cuzak farm and Jim’s childhood farm are places where “beauty stands in for anxiety” (182). One could infer from this statement that the beautiful Cuzak family evidences how art puts disrupted humanity back together again. But similar to the other farm scenes in both *Antonia* and *Main Street*, the Cuzak home represents not an autonomous aesthetic but a devotion grounded in the ordinary. Like the Burden Christmas which foreshadows it, the beauty of the Cuzak section comes from the family’s care for one another, beginning with an older brother comforting the younger over the loss of a dog (214-15). Ordinary devotion produces a beautiful creation; in other words, a kind of art issues from the family members’ concern for each other. Many inconspicuous moments collaborate to create the impression that the section as a whole yields: Anna ushers her mother to a seat, Antonia comforts her bereaved son, Cuzak presents his child with a toy (“this one... gets left”), the children demonstrate “physical harmony” with each other (“They leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other”) (216-32). Most importantly,

although no character explicitly notices her daily sacrifices as a wife and mother, the locus of the thriving family's devotion is Antonia herself.

Two points can be made here to clarify how the Cuzaks' ordinary devotion relates to art. First, Jim acts as the artist who commemorates the ordinary devotion of the family, particularly in Antonia herself. The two famous passages in this section, when Jim first sees her and when he meditates on her as he falls asleep, construct Antonia as a living masterpiece who fascinates and inspires: "She was there in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in that breathy, husky voice I remembered so well" (216). "She still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things" (229). Some read these passages to suggest art as the locus of the family, as Rosowski does: "Cather describes what I would call an aesthetic idea of the family—a social unit organized around the creation of art from life" (71). However, no one in the Cuzak family actually conceives of aesthetics as the purpose of their family (a comparison to Carol will make this clearer momentarily); rather, the moments mentioned above that make up the section show them absorbed in caring for one another. Rather than conceiving of aesthetics as the nucleus of their family, it is more accurate to say that art memorializes and sanctifies their devotion. Antonia is like the Christmas tree and like Kennicott performing an amputation; Jim and Carol are the artistic personalities who, like secular priests, venerate "common things" as a higher good.

Second, the Cuzak family seems to fulfill the principle that an artistic community replaces unsatisfying traditional relationships. This is the message that the classroom

scene in *So Big* implies, and I noted earlier how Synnott makes the same point in regard to a cluster of Cather protagonists. Rosowski also observes it in Jim's attachment to the Cuzaks and in *The Professor's House*, through Professor Godfrey's homecoming to the larger "human family" in Augusta versus his actual family (71-75). Jim finds his wife and New York friends unfulfilling, so he creates an artistic vision of Antonia that leads to new relationships with the Cuzaks, which promise a source of relational fulfillment that traditional family fails to offer him (239). True, but Jim's replacement community exists because of devotional and personal ties, not for an autonomous aesthetics that unites its followers—unlike, for instance, the community implied by the classroom scene in *So Big* or Carol's attempt at friendship through community theater or Erik Valborg. Blackford makes a related point when she focuses on the importance of affection in Jim's relationship to the Cuzaks; the fact that Jim has affection for Antonia in the first place lets him see artistic vision in her (1-4). More importantly, Antonia's consistent devotion to those she loves (Jim's devotion to Antonia is more questionable) creates the aura of human fulfillment that radiates from her family. It is hard to imagine that Jim would have found his longing for human connection answered in an artistic community like Ferber's art classroom or Thea Kronberg's opera performance.

Indeed, the fact that *My Antonia* winds up on a farm rather than in an opera house shows Cather's evolution toward the ordinary. Cather cultivated an early love for opera in concert with her developing artistic vision, and she began her career partly by reviewing shows in Lincoln (Woodress 91-96). Artistic performance features prominently in scenes that propel her stories forward; it constitutes the climax, for example, in *Song of the Lark* and "Wagner's Matinee." But while Cather maintained a

lifelong love for the performing arts, she wrote those two pieces relatively early in 1915 and 1904. *My Antonia* includes a theatre scene too, but in this scene theater functions more to push Jim forward in his search for fulfillment rather than enacting a climax. The passage occurs in the section on Lena Lingard during Jim's college days in Lincoln, and it analyzes the performance in detail that shows Cather's practice at review. But within the context of the novel the narration of the play serves to dramatize the tension between Lena and Jim, who is preoccupied with the ultimately unrealized possibility of finding relational fulfillment in Lena. At the play he "congratulate[s]" himself on Lena's superiority to typical Lincoln girls: "Lena was at least a woman, and I was a man" (178). His obsession with Lena becomes such that he leaves Lincoln on the advice of his mentor, which he confesses to Lena: "I never shall think about much else while I'm with you" (188). On the spectrum of exotic to ordinary, Lena (and the opera) fascinate Jim but ultimately push him on to something else, and he finds contentment not in Lena or in an artistic community but back on the Nebraska farm.

That Jim's search for secular fulfillment in Cather's most well-known work ends on a Midwest farm demonstrates the farm's superior capability to transform the ordinary into a new higher good. Jim's movement to, but past, the opera performance indicates something Bürger suggests: An artistic epiphany like a performance may shock the self and alert it to larger realities, but the performance itself cannot sustain the shock (80). This is where the ordinary takes over, Olson says, and sustains the awakening: "Ordinary life becomes the context in which epiphany is subsumed, reconsidered, and assessed... That is, the ordinary is often more politically efficacious than the moment of shock" (8). Cather refines her artistic vision toward this end, relocating the artistic high

from the position of ultimatum in “Wagner Matinee” and *Song of the Lark* to helpful shock in *My Antonia*. Jim never dismisses the opera, but he finds sustainable fulfillment in the ordinary Cuzak farm. Like the German farmers in *Main Street*, the Cuzaks’ ordinariness manifests itself in conjunction with their displacement as immigrants. Their uprootedness registers literally through Antonia’s loss of the English Jim taught her—“I’ve forgot my English so. I don’t often talk it any more”—and through Cuzak’s self-awareness as a Bohemian “city man” perpetually away from home: “‘Gee!’ he said in a hushed voice, as if he had just wakened up, ‘It don’t seem like I am away from there twenty-six year!’” (218, 236-37). Yet Jim marvels that Antonia has “managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world,” which Cuzak readily admits: “I never did think how I would be a settled man like this.” Cuzak and Antonia’s marriage embodies the convergences that define the Midwest farm, at once heartland and subaltern, displaced and settled. Like the sunset-amputation collaboration in *Main Street*, the joint facts of their disorientation and settledness make them more completely human, and this enigmatic fullness produces the locus of the ordinary on their farm that Jim finds so sustaining.

Given this progression toward ordinary devotion in Cather’s works, what of her statements on shunning friends’ parlors to serve art? The majority of these statements were made early in her career, and like her stories, her nonfiction writings indicate a tempering of her this ideology later in life. A letter to her childhood friend Irene Miner Weisz recalls a mutual memory, stating, “I did not really deserve that happy time. I had never been a very thoughtful daughter. My mind and heart were always too full of my one all-absorbing passion” (Jewell and Stout 442). She makes a similar admission to her

beloved brother Roscoe, writing from a solitary hotel where she often worked alone: “I have cared too much...cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end” (561). Shortly after Roscoe’s death, she wrote to Irene, “Roscoe’s death broke the last spring in me...The three summers I spent in Wyoming with him and his wife were among the happiest of my life. Now I don’t care about writing any more books. Now I know that nothing really matters to us but the people we love” (657). While these statements represent a typical aging experience and should not override Cather’s earlier assertions, *Antonia* comfortably holds up under both young Cather’s artistic gusto and her older reconsiderations, perhaps one reason why it has become her enduring work. Written in Cather’s prime, it nonetheless anticipates the reordering of art in respect to relationships that Cather expresses at the close of her career.

Turning again to *Main Street* and to the final stage of my argument, Lewis maintains uncertainty not only about art for art’s sake but also about ordinary devotion as a source of fulfillment. My reading finds Casey’s claim to be true of *Main Street*: Like many modern texts, it considers modern promises for fulfillment hopeful, yet troubling. The first part of the book, while charting Carol’s inability to make friends through art, charts a more hopeful parallel about the possibility of ordinary devotion. The very afternoon Carol walks Main Street for the first time, an unsophisticated Swedish woman moves off the farm to Gopher Prairie to look for work; Carol hires her. Although a minor character, Carol’s unsophisticated maid Bea parallels Antonia in ordinariness and devotion. Lewis casts Bea as naïvely excited to move to Gopher Prairie, like Antonia’s excitement to move to Black Hawk to learn “nice ways” from the Harlings (*Main Street* 41-43; *Antonia* 104, 223). Unlike Carol, Bea finds Gopher Prairie dazzling, and Lewis

makes Bea Carol's companion to point out their contrasts—exotic and ordinary, unfulfilled and fulfilled (Lingeman 133, Weber 156). Like Antonia, Bea proves beautiful despite her obliviousness to culture through her wholehearted devotion to Carol and to her own husband and son. But her presence in the novel is short-lived, and when she dies prematurely, Carol loses her truest friend (*Main Street* 322-29). Carol, on the other hand, more closely parallels the Black Hawk girls that Jim finds appropriately cultured and therefore unappealing (*Antonia* 131). Between Carol, Bea, Antonia, and the Black Hawk town girls, the unlikely Bea and Antonia emerge as superior women. Bea achieves without trying what Carol aims for but misses; her contrast to Carol and similarity to Antonia clarifies the point invited by both novels about the surprising relationship between art and the ordinary. Jim begins to probe this irony but does not really plumb it when he says, "I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it mattered—about her teeth, for instance. I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded" (218). Unlike Antonia, Carol Kennicott becomes the woman who keeps her teeth but loses her glow. Lewis's sequel "*Main Street's Been Paved*" describes, "She must once, I noted, have been slender and pretty, but she was growing dumpy and static, and about her was an air of having lost her bloom. I did not at first, though I had often talked to her, recognize her as Carol, Dr. Kennicott's good wife" (311-12).

Before this dismal pronouncement, however, *Main Street* entertains the hope that Carol might discover the ordinary devotion that makes Bea and Antonia beautiful. The novel heads toward this possibility when Carol leaves Kennicott to make a new life for herself in Washington D.C. By this brave move she intends to find culture and kinship,

and while Washington gives her the promised “white columns seen across leafy parks,” it returns predictably full-circle to the novel’s opening—banal, urban life that leaves her unsatisfied and lonely (423-39). But when Carol meets her old social rival from Gopher Prairie on the streets of Washington, she shocks herself by feeling genuinely delighted. The encounter leaves her missing Gopher Prairie, thinking, “Nobody in Washington cared enough for her to fret about her sins” (438-39). More tellingly, at a film theater she recognizes her old flame Erik Valborg, whom she had idolized as her kindred lover of art and everything that Gopher Prairie lacked. But Valborg appears in a smutty film reminiscent of the ones she complained about in Gopher Prairie playing a “pale part, which he played neither well nor badly.” Thoughtfully, she goes home and reads Kennicott’s letters. Before they seemed “stiff,” but now “there strode from them a personality, a personality unlike that of the languishing young man [Valborg] in the velvet jacket playing a dummy piano” (439-40). After a visit from the newly alluring Kennicott (a replay of their courtship in Saint Paul) and a disheartening conversation with a suffragist leader, Carol decides to move back to Gopher Prairie (440-50). Her return signals a hope that she might find the fulfillment in ordinary devotion that eluded her in art for art’s sake.

If *Main Street* followed the course of *Antonia*, Carol would find her return to Gopher Prairie as fulfilling as Jim finds his return to Antonia Cuzak. But Carol’s homecoming is an anticlimax, which renders *Main Street* more skeptical than *Antonia* about ordinary devotion as a higher good. While her stint in Washington essentially replays her Saint Paul courtship with Kennicott, she returns to Gopher Prairie different than she came as a newlywed. Young Carol moved to Gopher Prairie to enact village

improvement with confidence in the impetus of that vision; older Carol neither converts to ordinary values nor resurrects her deflated vision; she goes back simply because Washington also failed to live up to her dreams (441, 449). “After a week she decided that she was neither glad nor sorry to be back. She entered each day with the matter-of-fact attitude with which she had gone to her office in Washington. It was her task; there would be mechanical details and meaningless talk; what of it?” (450-51). The novel concludes with a disenchanted bedtime exchange between the couple. Carol rambles to Kennicott, “This Community Day makes me see how thoroughly I’m beaten...But I have won in this...I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be!...I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.” Kennicott’s reply constitutes the final line of the novel: “Sure. You bet you have...Say did you notice whether the girl put that screwdriver back?” (455-56). In this distinctly ambiguous ending (Schorer 295-96), Carol maintains a wishful thinking about her original ideology of art but a disbelief in its efficacy. McGuire summarizes, “For Carol time is up and she is soon to settle into the bath of her decomposed dreams” (68).

The ending’s dissatisfying exchange between Carol and Kennicott invites the argument: If *Main Street* labors to show the inefficacy of art for art’s sake, it remains deeply unsure of ordinary devotion as an alternative. Martha Nussbaum identifies a “deep sadness” in all of Lewis’s novels, reflective of his own relationships, which longs for true love and despairs that its possibility has passed (97-98). Schorer acknowledges that Lewis is “a profoundly sentimental man” (7), and Nussbaum argues that all of Lewis’s novels are really “the internal writing of love”; love is the “morning and evening star” of his work (102, 117). Her characterization of *Elmer Gantry* as a “shy romance”

applies to *Main Street* as well (97). After Carol's failed play, when she turns from caring about art to longing for "her people," the focus shifts from village reform to a careful and poignant buildup of marital alienation, the theme that dominates the remainder of the book (301-03, 320-21, 405). Nussbaum credits this theme to Lewis's own failed marriages: "No one wanted love more than he, or more needed it, and no one more often doubted it" (118). Although Carol and Will share social circles, hobbies, house space, and even affection, they are more like compatible roommates than devoted lovers. I suggest that what makes the last words in the novel pointedly dissatisfying is this absence of devotion where it should most belong. Recall Kennicott in surgery: In that moment, there was no one else in the world to him besides the man on the table. Carol seeks and does not find that quality of devotion toward her. Lewis makes this clear in their first Christmas, when Carol thinks she is missing art but in reality is missing devotion. Lewis sets it up thus, bridging Carol's Christmas letdown with a commentary on Kennicott's husbandry:

She muttered unsteadily, "Must run up and put on my shoes—slippers so cold." In the not very romantic solitude of the locked bathroom she sat on the slippery edge of the tub and wept.

II.

Kennicott had five hobbies: medicine, land-investment, Carol, motoring, and hunting. It is not certain in what order he preferred them. (201)

During Kennicott's second courtship in the last chapters of the book, Lewis briefly holds out a possibility in a romantic seaside moment for a deeper connection between the couple: "It had not occurred to her that there was also a story of Will Kennicott, into which she entered only so much as he entered into hers; that he had bewilderments and concealments as intricate as her own, and soft treacherous desires for sympathy. Thus

she brooded, looking at the amazing sea, holding his hand” (446). The screwdriver ending confirms this moment fizzled, and unlike Antonia, who exits fulfilled, attractive, and surrounded by a devoted family, Carol exits with wishful thinking—purportedly for a beautiful Main Street, but more truthfully for a devoted husband. *Main Street* thus communicates a haunting uncertainty about the likelihood of devotion flourishing in the very realms where it should be most ordinary. If art sanctifies ordinary devotion, it follows that the likelihood of art also diminishes in its absence, and the possibilities of secular fulfillment opened by art and ordinary devotion together become dimmer.

Conclusion

In 1910 Illinois poet Vachel Lindsay published “Village Improvement Parade,” meant to be sung to the popular tune “A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.” Shaw makes the connection to the sociology textbook that instigated Carol’s vision (106-07), but the poem also illustrates the relationship between art and secular fulfillment with which my analysis of *Main Street* and *Antonia* began:

Fair streets are better than silver, green parks are better than gold.
Bad public taste is mob law; good public taste is democracy.
The moral crusade progresses with flags exhorting:
A bad Designer is to That Extent a bad Citizen
A crude administrator is damned already...
Our best pictures should be painting
Our best moments should be real sculpture
Our best buildings should be real architecture.
Ugliness is a kind of misgovernment.

It is the cross roads, Resurrection parade, parade.
Wandering round the shrines we understand...
Love and Beauty
Crusade, crusade. (224-29)

The poem is clearly Carol, but it is also Cather, albeit more colloquially, in statements such as God rejecting bad hymn collections for “coral islands, palm-tufted,

that glow with umber and gold” (*World and the Parish* 117-18). In Lindsay’s utopian *Golden Book of Springfield*, citizens unite for a quasi-religious renovation of their drab town into a “City of God.” Cather as a girl had her own town named Sandy Point, platted at the back of her parents’ property with the help of the neighboring Miner children (Palmer 20-22). Cather was the mayor, and among other improvements she had her father haul six loads of sand to upgrade Sandy Point’s Main Street (dust was a frequent complaint in *Red Cloud*). Palmer considers Sandy Point formative for Cather’s artistic imagination as well as for relationships, and Cather wrote Irene Miner Weisz late in her career, “I want somebody from Sandy Point to go along with me to the end” (Palmer 17-18, Jewell and Stout 442). Like Carol, young Cather had a streak of village improvement in her.

But Lindsay’s parade poem also reinforces the latter half of my argument in this chapter by what it does not say. In both *Main Street* and *Antonia*, the best art exists not in the beautified village or the metropolis but on Midwest farms. The fact that art comes from unseemly places suggests that these novels eventually fix their gaze not on art for art’s sake but on something else, which I have argued is ordinary devotion to one’s loved ones. The farm families in *Main Street* and *Antonia* are not focused on producing art in the sense that Ferber’s students paint a nude model in a classroom, but art nonetheless resides more at the kitchen tables of the injured farmer and of the Cuzaks where Kennicott and *Antonia* are at their finest—as well as Carol and Jim, the artists who sanctify everyday devotion. The Midwest farm, therefore, emerges as *the* place that can sustainably sacralize the ordinary through its paradoxical nature as heartland and subaltern. Conceptualizing the Midwest farm in this manner resonates with a statement

in one of Cather's essays. In it she recalls a New Yorker informing her, "I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it." Cather remarks that she had to "recover" from this "very general opinion" and alludes favorably to *Main Street* in rejecting the view that "London is supposed to be more engaging than, let us say, Gopher Prairie; even if the writer knows Gopher Prairie very well and London very casually" (*On Writing* 92, 94). Lewis, asked to contribute an essay on artistic style, responds with a similar affirmation of the ordinary as the locus of good art:

This is good style:

John Smith meets James Brown on Main Street, Sauk Centre, Minnesota, and remarks, "Mornin'! Nice day!" It is not merely good style; it is perfect."
("Letter" 188-90)

Cather's and Lewis's remarks locate art in the ordinary, and I began this chapter by suggesting that, by doing so, they both confront the autonomy of the aesthetic. Moi suggests that this ideology, which she names the tenet of modernism, has "come to seem increasingly empty" (103-04), and *Antonia* and *Main Street* anticipate this problem by turning the seer into an acknowledger of ordinary devotion epitomized on the Midwest farm. In doing so they represent the nova effect that characterizes the modern condition of secularity, in which people pursue expanding options for authentic fulfillment. This condition could be summarized by the phrase "variation upon variation," which Weber uses to characterize Carol's repeated quests for fulfillment but also conveys the rapidly expanding options for seeking meaningful life that excite and trouble Cather and Lewis (155). Both novels examine the specific option of finding fulfillment through ordinary devotion, sanctified by art as a new higher good. Both find this possibility hopeful yet, as Lewis's conclusion to *Main Street* particularly emphasizes, the certainty of any particular answer remains tentative—a quality which marks both novels as peculiarly modern.

Notes

1. "Has the drugstore sent my black bag here?...Quiet now! Soon you'll be sleeping like a baby. There! There! Soon it will feel better."
2. "Here, and hold this—this lamp—like this!"
3. "Just a bit more."

Chapter Five: Creative Vision and Ordered Relationships in *Black Elk Speaks*

Philip Deloria concludes *Indians in Unexpected Places* with the statement that the early twentieth century opened a window of opportunity for Native-white relations. A low point for Natives given the confines of reservation and education systems, it nonetheless posed “a moment of paradox and opportunity” for scripting new and sympathetic cultural exchanges between the groups (225-26). Deloria comments upon a photo of Red Cloud Woman sitting beneath a hair dryer in a salon, an apparently anomalous image that illustrates this moment. He urges reexamination of the window, now largely closed and forgotten, for its insights into the current century (238-40). In this chapter on *Black Elk Speaks*, I take up Deloria’s question of how Natives are situated within the particular historical moment of the early twentieth century in the United States (225-26). During what Deloria names the first era Natives engaged in American culture’s broader forms (232-33), Black Elk collaborated with John Neihardt to produce *Black Elk Speaks*, which became, as George Linden says, “The Book That Would Not Die” (80). *Black Elk Speaks* has been “emulated, valued, derided, or almost worshipped,” Brian Holloway observes, like *Hamlet* or the U.S. Constitution (191), such that new scholarship nearly always begins by acknowledging that the more Black Elk is studied “the more controversial he becomes” (Holler, *Reader* xiii). Vine Deloria calls it a masterpiece and standard of Native literatures, and N. Scott Momaday describes it as “one of the truly fortunate collaborations in our American heritage” (Deloria, *Sender* 3; Momaday 31). But, as Michael Steltenkamp observes, for every commentary written there is a different Black Elk, from cultural advocate to cultural sell-out (xix).

In view of the controversies that the text generates, I am interested in *Black Elk Speaks* for how its content embodies, precisely through its collaboration, the spiritual condition of its time. While Vine Deloria calls it the “North American bible of all tribes” (“Foreword” xv), it has become a bible for non-Natives as well. Holloway states that it “reflects the diversity and anxieties within North America” (5), and in this chapter I examine how it shows the diversity and anxieties of the spiritual climate of early twentieth-century modernity. To do this, I employ Charles Taylor’s definition of secularity in the contemporary West that I have been tracing in different ways in each of my chapters. Secularity runs deeper than mere decline of institutionalized religion or private belief; Taylor instead defines the shift toward secularity as “one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (3). This shift creates a nova effect, in which the possibilities of human fulfillment with or without belief become ever wider (300-04). While previous chapters examined particular quests for fulfillment by different protagonists, in this chapter I will focus on how Black Elk and Neihardt’s collaboration epitomizes the condition of spiritual nova in modern America. Reading passages for Black Elk’s voice as well as for Neihardt’s, I will argue that in terms of Neihardt’s authorship, *Black Elk Speaks* is about the transcendentalist creative vision, whereas in terms of Black Elk’s authorship, it is about living in rightly ordered relationships. The scenes through which I will unfold this argument center around the Great Vision and also on the sense of place which crescendos throughout the book as an antidote to materialism and a source of well-being in specific locations in the Midwest.

The position of this chapter within the larger project acknowledges the way that texts in previous chapters underplay indigenous presence in the Midwest. If settler colonialism entails the desire to erase indigenous presence—"you, go away," as Lorenzo Veracini defines it—then concealment or elimination of indigenous presence characterizes protagonists in previous chapters (1). In *Giants*, the discovery of an indigenous grave and trail on Per Hansa's homestead prompts assertions to anxious wives that Natives have "become peaceful and civilized," while the only substantial encounter with them in the novel establishes that "we live here...By God! I guess we do!" whereas Natives pass on (72-97). In Micheaux's *Homesteader*, the chapter titled "Indians Shot the Town Up" similarly contrasts the permanence of settlers to the disappearance of Natives; the bartender chases "breeds" out of the town, which is located on land "that had once belonged to an Indian" (43-48). In *Main Street*, Lewis comments on indigenous invisibility in his opening sentence: "On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewas camped two generations ago, a girl stood...She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul" (3). Carol was not conscious of "squaws and portages...whose shadows were all about her," Lewis points out: "She was meditating on walnut fudge, the plays of Brioux." In *Antonia*, the text which mentions Natives least, young Jim Burden's assessment that Nebraska was "not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" reflects the invisibility of Natives in his consciousness (8). This consciousness persists into his adulthood when he appreciates the conversion of the prairie into farms: "The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea"

(199). In this project, *Black Elk Speaks* ushers into visibility the indigenous presence in the Midwest that remains largely concealed in previous texts.

Yet the visibility of Natives brought by this particular text is complicated by its collaborative nature; and like the Native woman in the salon and her photographer, it is often unclear “who is tricking whom” in Black Elk and Neihardt’s collaboration (240). But precisely because of the collaborators’ impact upon each other, I argue that *Black Elk Speaks* is something new—a spiritual third way that amounts to more than a sum of Black Elk and Neihardt, which could not have been generated without the conditions of the nova effect that Taylor outlines. Namely, Black Elk’s and Neihardt’s different approaches—ordered relationships on the one hand and transcendentalist vision on the other—together produce a sense of place that evolves from their spiritual tensions, thereby embodying the modern self’s ability to harmonize divergent spiritualities within itself. I conclude by suggesting the implications that *Black Elk Speaks* holds in a secular age for religious appropriation and influence.

Creative Vision and Ordered Relationship

The two chapters that precede the Great Vision in *Black Elk Speaks* frame the respective themes Black Elk and Neihardt invest in throughout the text. For Neihardt the book is about creative vision, specifically Black Elk’s Great Vision which the first two chapters set up, a structure which reflects one of Neihardt’s key tenets. As a ninth-grade boy Neihardt experienced a vision of his own which initiated and defined his lifelong pursuit of art. Coming home from school with a fever one day in 1892, he went to bed and, while his mother cooled him with washrags, he felt he was flying through space (Anderson 16). Meditating on the dream afterward, young Neihardt understood it as a

visionary experience which reset the course of his life to the higher pursuit of art: “It was the dream that changed the direction of my life” (qtd. in Anderson 17). Neihardt came to see the creative dream as focal for all artists and individuals who want to live according to higher values. Outlining these values in his artistic treatise *Poetic Values: Their Reality and Our Need of Them*, Neihardt dedicates the second half of the treatise to “The Creative Dream.” Vine Deloria credits the centrality of Neihardt’s boyhood vision to his life as an artist when he states that “even the skeptic must view this dream as a vocational calling of unusual intensity” (*Sender 2*).

The structure of *Black Elk Speaks* accords with Neihardt’s emphasis on the creative dream as life-defining. The first chapter, in words now well-known to be Neihardt’s, introduces the book as “the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it,” a statement that signals the book’s main theme (1). The second chapter reinforces this theme by employing a pre-vision to set up the Great Vision which follows in chapter three. In this pre-vision, five-year-old Black Elk hears a kingbird tell him, “Listen! A voice is calling you!” He sees two men (who reappear in the third chapter) coming headfirst at him through the clouds and singing, “Behold, a sacred voice is calling you” (14-15). In the transcriptions for *Black Elk Speaks* in *The Sixth Grandfather*, Black Elk states only that he heard indistinct singing leading up to this pre-vision, but Neihardt strengthens the sense of calling in a phrase reminiscent of the Hebrew prophet Samuel’s divine call: “It was like somebody calling me, and I thought it was my mother, but there was nobody there” (DeMallie, *SG* 108; *BES* 14).¹ As Black Elk gazes at the men, they suddenly become geese and fly away, and a thunderstorm follows. Black Elk says, “I did not tell this vision to any one. I liked to think about it, but I was afraid to tell it.” This

short scene, in addition to the thematic statement in chapter one, prepares the reader to anticipate the Great Vision in the next chapter as focal. Neihardt had shared his own boyhood vision with Black Elk, and the affinity he saw between the childhood experiences is indicative in his recording of Black Elk's affirmation: "That was your power vision, if you had not had that vision, you never would have done anything" (qtd. in Holloway 62-63). It is not surprising that Neihardt would arrange his material from Black Elk to parallel his own experience, and Steltenkamp is probably accurate when he asserts that Neihardt designs the impression that Black Elk considered the Great Vision life-defining (32). In reality, Black Elk may have seen it as one experience in a lifetime of cumulative spiritual revelation. It would be atypical for a Lakota to "linger solely at one point" in a lifetime of spiritual experience, and Steltenkamp notes that Black Elk's Great Vision appears nowhere in his systematic account of Lakota religious rites in *The Sacred Pipe*.

If the structure of *Black Elk Speaks* owes itself to Neihardt's creative vision, it nonetheless reveals what Black Elk is invested in throughout the text—living in rightly ordered relationship. Matthew Taylor describes Black Elk's conception of the world as "the idea that openness, connectedness, and vulnerability are constitutive of life" (1057). This statement resonates with Charles Taylor's description of worldviews of enchantment. Enchantment sees the world as a cosmos (versus a disenchanted universe, discussed later), that is, a "humanly meaningful" "ordered whole": "The cosmos exhibits the order which we should exemplify in our own lives, both individually and as societies" (60). Two concepts and an implication follow from Charles Taylor's cosmos of enchantment which are pertinent to Black Elk. First, boundaries and identities among

nature and humans are more fluid than fixed, a concept which Charles Taylor terms “porous” (36-49). Second, because of both the order and porosity of the cosmos, we humans are inherently dependent on rather than independent from the rest of the cosmos, including fellow humans and the rest of nature (41-42). By implication, our conception of nature is one of intimate reciprocity; we have duties to nature, patterns in nature inform how we live as humans, and disruptions in nature indicate equivalent disruption in our own lives. This worldview takes many forms: Charles Taylor’s Middle Ages, the character Beret in *Giants in the Earth*, and also Black Elk’s Lakota orientation, as Matthew Taylor describes it—“openness, connectedness, and vulnerability.” DeMallie similarly explains the Lakota worldview as one “where the place of human beings was minor but well-defined” (“Lakota” 32). Steltenkamp notes that “humility and dependence” are inherent in this orientation, observing that “the natural order” indicates the *wakan* (mysterious wonders of reality, often translated “sacred”) (168, 11). Black Elk, reflecting the Lakota worldview of enchantment, thus focuses on how the order of the cosmos governs the many relationships within it. I will read this as the defining mark of Black Elk’s voice throughout the text, designated by the phrase “ordered relationships” or simply “relational.”

It is this voice that speaks in the first sentence of the text when, acknowledging Neihardt’s request for his life story, Black Elk states, “If it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters?” (1). Positioning his individual life within the larger cosmic order, he explains, “It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the winds of the air and all green things; for these are children of one

mother and their father is one Spirit.” While his personal life events “may seem to be the very tale itself,” he clarifies that the book is not about an individual hero but rather (here Neihardt’s voice picks up) the “mighty vision” that we have seen becomes Neihardt’s structure for the book. But the bulk of the chapter is not about vision but about the offering of the peace pipe, which Steltenkamp describes as an acknowledgment of dependence (168). Observing his ordered relationship to higher powers and subsequent dependence, Black Elk says, “Because no good thing can be done by any man alone, I will first make an offering and send a voice to the Spirit of the World, that it may help me to be true. See, I fill this sacred pipe...With your power only can I face the winds” (2, 4). His subsequent description of the pipe details, visually, the cosmic order reflected in nature—four quarters of the universe, yielding rain, cleansing wind, light, and growth according to the cardinal directions. Placing humans in relationship to this order, he adds, “Is not the sky a father and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet or wings or roots their children...at [earth’s] breast we suck as babies all our lives, along with all the animals and birds and trees and grasses...Hear me, four quarters of the world—a relative I am!” (2, 4). The porosity of these relationships with nature is reflected in next chapter’s pre-vision, which shows how human and non-human identities are more fluid than fixed. Black Elk hears a kingbird speaking words to him, and the two men he sees flying in the clouds wheel around to become geese, a transformation also seen in the pipe origin story when the sacred woman becomes a bison, and repeated frequently in the Great Vision (14-15, 4). Although the cosmos is ordered, identities are also porous, emphasizing the tight relationships between humans and non-humans.

The second chapter emphasizes human-to-human relationships. Black Elk opens with a short genealogy or family tree, which is actually the first material in the transcriptions in *Sixth Grandfather* (BES 6, SG 101-02). Black Elk recalls the peaceful periods of his childhood as spent playing games with other boys (11-12). This chapter incorporates other storytellers who appear throughout the book, Black Elk's friends Fire Thunder and Standing Bear. Standing Bear states, "I am four years older than Black Elk, and he and I have been good friends since boyhood" (13). Black Elk's collaboration with these friends, his descriptions of communal life, and his genealogy position him within a network of relationships in his human community; "I am a Lakota of the Oglala band" (6). In these two opening chapters, the passage that best encapsulates Black Elk's cosmos of rightly ordered relationships is his analogy of islands:

Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and plenty for us. But the Wasichus [whites] came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu; and it is dirty with lies and greed. (7-8)

This passage communicates Black Elk's sense of cosmic relationships, both among humans and non-humans, and the disruption caused when these relationships are disordered. The island analogy reappears later in the book, and its sense of isolation and alienation gets at the center of Black Elk's relational orientation.

The Great Vision and Transcendentalism

Comparing the Great Vision to contemporaneous vision texts, Holloway notices the relative lack of white intrusion on Black Elk's vision (92-93). Although the book's focus on the Great Vision is more Neihardt than Black Elk, the vision itself is not, and it demonstrates Black Elk's ordered relationships in several important aspects. First, the

predominance of numbers, colors, and lists in the vision depict a carefully ordered cosmos. While Mark Hollabaugh explains the particular meanings of important numbers and colors in Lakota religion (44-50), more basic than their respective meanings is their reflection of Black Elk's ordered cosmos. Four groups of twelve horses, black, white, sorrel, and buckskin, appear from the four cardinal directions of the earth (18-19). Black Elk is ushered into a council of six Grandfathers, "older than men can ever be," who represent the "Powers of the World"—the four cardinal directions plus sky and earth (20). When the Grandfathers usher the Lakota along the red road of prosperity, Black Elk states, "the order of their going was like this," and proceeds to list "First...Second...Third..." in order of tribal structure (chiefs, advisers, old men, old women) (27-28). The people make four ascents on the red road, which represent the four generations Black Elk sees in his lifetime (28). In addition to the text itself, the accompanying centerpiece illustrations by Standing Bear visually reinforce how numbers and colors communicate an ordered cosmos. One drawing shows Black Elk facing the six grandfathers; another positions him in the center of four quadrants of different-colored groups of horses. One illustration, centering him under the tree of life in the sacred hoop, features an "X" of two lines that cross the drawing to divide it into four quarters, colored according to the four directions. These different colors, numbers, and lists never merely describe but inform humans about the order of the cosmos and their relationships within it.

Second, the Great Vision demonstrates porosity. David Martinez explains that a typical Lakota vision quest involves fasting, sleeplessness, and isolation in nature in order to help the senses "cross" the normal but fluid boundaries of the ordered cosmos. "In

concrete terms, one knows one has crossed that threshold when animals begin to talk” (90-91). Although Black Elk undergoes this kind of quest in a later chapter, his Great Vision is brought on by physical sickness, which accomplishes the same crossover (17, 35-36). Throughout the Great Vision ordinary boundaries become porous. Animals talk and have agency, such as the bay horse who acts as Black Elk’s guide and gives him directions such as “Behold me!” “See!” “Make haste!” (18-19). The six grandfathers transform one by one into a horse, a goose, an elk, an eagle, and a boy (the last transforms another man into a bison) (21-23). Black Elk fights a blue man who transforms into a turtle and represents drought (26). Black Elk’s fellow Lakotas “changed into elks and bison and all four-footed beings and even into fowls,” later changing “back to human” (28-29). Black Elk himself does not notice when he begins to breathe lightning and his horse’s mane becomes cloud (34). Even non-creature parts of nature take on agency: Black Elk finds himself “in the middle of a great white plain with snowy hills and mountains staring at us” (18), and later he sees “the hills look up afraid and the grasses on the hills” (24). All of this demonstrates what Matthew Taylor calls characteristic of the Lakota vision, “an uncertain, often fearful process in which susceptibility to the putative outside is both the condition of our being and the becoming of our end” (1058). Taylor notes how such porosity contrasts with the “imperious self-containment” of modern individualism, observing that in the Lakota cosmology “mastery—of self, of world—is impossible, the attempt lethal” (a statement that recalls Per Hansa’s fatality in *Giants in the Earth*). Taylor observes how James Mooney, the first major documenter of the Ghost Dance, attributed its porous attributes to “a failure of self to have proper boundaries,” which Mooney extended to many religious visionaries

including Mohammed, Joan of Arc, and Paul, concluding that the modern solution to all these problems was “a science of closed personhood” (1058, 1060-61, 1066-67). In contrast to Mooney’s position, the porosity of self and others is crucial to the Great Vision and distinguishes Black Elk’s voice in it.

Third, the Great Vision is populated. As a later section will show, modern individualism conceives solitary visions as me-and-nature, but Black Elk does not escape society in his vision, human or otherwise. The two men from his five-year-old pre-vision usher him into the Great Vision (17), where he spends most of his time with six grandfathers. He sees the earth as “a hoop of peoples” (22), and he finds courage to charge the blue man representing drought because he has a worldwide audience: “All the world was filled with voices of all kinds that cheered me, so I charged” (25). A similar statement appears later when he reenters the grandfathers’ council: “As I rode in through the rainbow door, there were cheering voices from all over the universe” (34). The four ascents in the vision are told as the story of his whole people, which culminates in a worldwide dance: “The virgins danced, and all the circled horses. The leaves on the trees, the grasses on the hills and in the valleys, the waters in the creeks and in the rivers and the lakes, the four-legged and the two-legged and the wings of the air—all danced together” (32). As this passage also illustrates, the Great Vision is even more populated when one considers animals and even hills and creeks not as othered nature but as relatives and agents. Black Elk’s horse guide calls his attention to “a whole skyful of horses dancing around me” (19), and the fifth Grandfather causes the sky to fill with “friendly wings all coming toward me” (23). Standing Bear’s illustrations also reinforce the populated quality of the vision. The first drawing shows Black Elk with the two

flying men, the second with the Grandfathers, and the third with horses flanking him on four sides. The fourth and fifth illustrations which depict him with the tree of life at the earth's center include at least one person in each quarter of the earth. No illustration shows Black Elk as solitary. Matthew Taylor states that the hoop Black Elk sees represents the interdependency of all of life, as his careful descriptions of animals show how his sense of individuality or "I" means "enhanced relatedness" (1070). The densely populated Great Vision evidences Black Elk's relational orientation.

Fourth, and closely related, the Great Vision's purpose is to bring life for the whole people. Black Elk's well-known phrase "That my people may live!" originates in *The Sacred Pipe* and conveys the purpose not only of Black Elk's vision but of everything in Lakota life (Brown 137, Steltenkamp 12). In the Great Vision the theme "Live!" appears in the tree of life and the song given to Black Elk. A Voice instructs Black Elk to "give [the people] the flowering stick that they may flourish," which becomes the tree of life when Black Elk plants it in the center of the hoop (26-27). The onlookers celebrate, "Here we shall raise our children and be as little chickens under the mother sheo's [prairie chicken's] wing." As Black Elk listens to the wind blowing through the tree, the sacred pipe flies underneath the tree "spreading deep peace around it." Later in the vision Black Elk receives an herb to heal the people and "a song of power": "A good nation I will make live. / This the nation above has said. / They have given me the power to make over" (30). The tree of life and the healing song and herb clarify that Black Elk's vision is for the people's flourishing, not for any individual or secret benefit.

This nationwide scope is perhaps the most significant way the Great Vision embodies Black Elk's ordered relationship, for it defines his position in his relational network as a healer. Black Elk later fulfills this appointment when he finds the herb in his vision and uses it to conduct his first healing ceremony, which establishes him as a medicine man, an active role he practiced for years (157). Black Elk's prayer at this initial healing demonstrates his understanding of his relational role as healer: "You have said this to me: The weak shall walk. In vision you...have shown me the power to make over. The water in the cup that you have given me, by its power shall the dying live. The herb that you have sown me, through its power shall the feeble walk upright...you have given me a sacred, cleansing wind, and where this passes the weak shall have strength" (155). Black Elk's healing function in the community motivates his involvement in the Ghost Dance near the end of *Black Elk Speaks*, although, as Steltenkamp notes, his actual involvement in the Dance was relatively minor (62). The tree of life reappears to Black Elk several times in the course of his involvement with the Dance, which he decides to join because he thinks, "Maybe I was not meant to do this myself, but if I helped with the power that was given me, the tree might bloom again and the people prosper" (180-86). The relational purpose of his vision is penultimate to the close of the *Black Elk* transcriptions in *Sixth Grandfather* just before the trip to Harney Peak in a section DeMallie titles "Making the Tree Bloom." In this section Black Elk reiterates the relational purpose of the vision: "I had been appointed by my vision to be an intercessor of my people...if I were helpless or died, my people would die also...If I prosper, my people would also prosper" (293-94). George Linden notes that the title of the German translation of *Black Elk Speaks* is "I Call My People," which communicates this theme

(81). Arnold Krupat observes that the theme “Live!” conveys a commitment to renewal and restoration in response to loss and death, which involves the well-being of the entire community (4-14). Quoting William Bevis, Krupat comments on the “*insufferability* of individuality” to Native conceptions of well-being (4). It would be nearly inconceivable for Black Elk’s theme of “Live!” not to extend beyond himself to the whole people. One might try to imagine the Hebraic and early Christian visions of Ezekiel, Daniel, Samson’s mother, Paul, or John apart from their implications upon whole peoples; like the Great Vision, they would become meaningless. Similar to these visions in its far-reaching scope, the Great Vision demonstrates its relational orientation in comparison to the transcendentalist visions examined momentarily.

Although not directly related to the Great Vision, an interesting chapter in *Black Elk Speaks* demonstrates the ordered relationships I have been tracing thus far. “High Horse’s Courting” initially strikes the reader as extraneous, and in fact it does not appear in the original 1931 transcriptions for Black Elk, although the 1944 transcriptions show it belongs to him (DeMallie, *SG* 77). Black Elk relates the story as one told him by an older friend in childhood; the gist is how a lovesick youth wins a wife with the help of his cousin after many failed attempts (52-58). The story conveys Black Elk’s sense of humor through High Horse’s comical attempts to steal his beloved out of her parents’ teepee. He paints himself like a ghastly spirit with black and white stripes so the girl’s parents will be afraid to chase him. But when the mother hears him cutting the leather thongs (which fasten the girl to the bed to protect her from thieves), he freezes from fear till sunrise; when the girl sees him and screams, he runs away in the daylight before the whole village. The focus seems to be on High Horse’s funny lovesickness, but the person

initiating all his attempted kidnaps is his cousin Red Deer. Red Deer notices High Horse's misery, devises multiple plans, and never gives up when High Horse bungles them. In the end High Horse declares he will go on the war-path by himself out of desperation, but Red Deer replies, "No, cousin, you are not going on the war-path alone, because I am going with you" (58). The two successfully steal a herd of horses, which wins High Horse the girl. The story is about ordered relationships in every sense. It constructs a chain of multiple relationships between tellers, from Watanye (the original teller, Black Elk's friend) to Black Elk, from Black Elk to Neihardt, from Neihardt to the reader. More importantly, it involves a relational goal (marriage) which is achieved by the indefatigable loyalty of a cousin. It accentuates the Great Vision by reiterating in an entirely different mood the theme of relationship consistent in Black Elk's voice throughout the book.

The final evidences for ordered relationship in the Great Vision are the horse dance and heyoka ceremony. Black Elk explains to Neihardt that a vision must be realized through ceremony or ritual for its power to be accessed: "I think I have told you, but if I have not, you must have understood, that a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see" (157). Black Elk learns this personally when, troubled by his vision years later at age seventeen, he consults a medicine man who instructs him, "You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth" (122-23). Martinez notes how this communal inauguration reinforces the whole-people mindset of the visionary: "His thoughts should be more about seeking a blessing for his people than about his own personal gain" (90). Black Elk's enactment of his vision as a ceremony is typical of how

a vision is validated by the community. Martinez borrows Patricia Albers and Seymour Parker's definition of the vision ceremony as "a mechanism for identity formation, serving to legitimate [one's] actions and status in the community" (94-95). Only after performing his vision, Martinez explains, could Black Elk begin "serving the people in [his] new role" as a healer. The horse dance, then, officiates Black Elk's new installment in the people's relationship network through a carefully ordered ritual in which the entire community participates. Six old men are selected to represent the six grandfathers, four young women for the virgins, riders for the horses of four different colors (125). The players act out the Great Vision step by step, such that the reader might imagine a script being performed, and the rest of the community participates by presenting offerings to the virgins while the four groups of horses rotate through the quarters of the village hoop (127-34). This performance shows Black Elk's commitment to serving the community in his new role, but it also shows, as Steltenkamp points out, the immense support that the community gives him (49-51). The ceremony reinforces the mutuality of ordered relationships within the group.

The horse dance also reinforces the ordered relationships between the human community and the rest of the cosmos, reminding the people of their porosity. Contrasting Lakota rituals to Christian, Holler states that "the purpose of traditional ritual is to invoke and harness supernatural power, not necessarily to worship in the Christian sense" (*Religion* xxxi). Black Elk accesses the power of his vision and exercises his relationship to the supernatural through the rightly ordered channel of ceremony, which is confirmed by nature. As he sings his song to the spirits of the cloud, "a strange thing" happens: He sees an approaching thunderhead, and as horses neigh and paw across the

village, he sees the grandfathers' council teepee in the clouds, and the people run to fasten their teepees as hail falls just outside the village (129). Black Elk understands this event not only as confirmation of his vision but also as the relationship between the people in the ceremony and the rest of the cosmos: "What we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. It knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here" (129-30). After the ceremony people find "prints of tiny pony hoofs" around the village "as though the spirit horses had been dancing while we danced" (134). The channel of spiritual power manifests not only in these confirmations of nature but also in the people's bodies, fulfilling the vision's purpose of "Live!" Sick persons who make offerings to the virgins are cured, and everyone "felt better" (131). Black Elk summarizes the whole-people healing effect: "I felt very happy, for I could see that my people were all happier. Many crowded around me and said that they or their relatives who had been feeling sick were well again...even the horses seemed to be healthier and happier after the dance" (134).

Shortly after the horse dance, Black Elk receives an additional vision instructing him to perform the heyoka ceremony. Black Elk explains that heyokas are "sacred fools, doing everything wrong or backwards to make the people laugh" when they are discouraged or suffering (144). He explains that it is planned this way, and it "seems to be very foolish, but it is not so," but rather makes it "easier for the power to come" to the people (145). These explanations demonstrate the ordered cosmos of the Lakota worldview, particularly the carefully balanced equilibrium between suffering and happiness. Black Elk states that "truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs." Charles Taylor similarly explains the

predominance of mock festivals in worldviews of enchantment throughout the world, in which “the ordinary order of things was inverted, or ‘the world was turned upside down’” (45-46). The basic principle behind mock ceremonies like the Lakota heyoka ceremony, Taylor posits, is the need to maintain equilibrium between order and chaos, or structure and anti-structure (47-48). The heyoka ceremony rebalances the relationship between these cosmic influences, as Black Elk explains: “When the ceremony was over, everybody felt a great deal better, for it had been a day of fun. They were better able now to see the greenness of the world, the wideness of the sacred day, the colors of the earth, and to set these in their minds” (149). Both the heyoka ceremony and the horse dance in *Black Elk Speaks* represent the broad predominance of ceremony and ritual in Lakota life, which in turn more broadly indicates the ordered relationships central to the worldview. George Sword, in James Walker’s *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, states, “In the former times the Lakotas had customs and ceremonies that governed almost everything they did” (81). DeMallie explains that ceremony does not simply reflect belief but furthers it: “Through ritual a person came to expand his knowledge” (“Lakota” 34). Leslie Marmon Silko’s short poem at the beginning of *Ceremony*, while not Lakota, succinctly summarizes ceremony’s importance: “The only cure / I know / is a good ceremony” (3).

If the Great Vision demonstrates, as I have endeavored to show, Black Elk’s ordered relationships, it also invites deeper investigation of Neihardt’s creative vision. Holloway explains that Neihardt was interested in Black Elk’s vision for how it connected to his own concept of the creative or artistic vision (1-2). Neihardt viewed his art as Black Elk viewed his religion, seeking to “induce a transcendent experience in his readers” through art as “a conduit to spirituality” (62-63, 2, 7). The purpose of art is to

conduct one to a state of higher consciousness; Neihardt defines the creative dream as such in *Poetic Values*: “The creative dream, then, is the process of reconstructing ordinary representation of the world in keeping with an expanded view of it; a creative fusing of two views of the world, each of which would normally seem to the other like a dream” (97-98). In a synopsis of *Poetic Values* to a friend Neihardt defines higher consciousness: “The values of the lower *scale are created in consciousness in keeping with the sense-level of awareness*; and...the higher *values (rising to religious experience)* are created in consciousness *in keeping with a higher (or expanded) state of awareness*” (qtd. in Holloway 62). The error of modern people, Neihardt explains, lies in assuming that the lower or ordinary state of consciousness is more real than the higher state of consciousness, which we mistakenly call “imaginary.” He gives two analogies in *Poetic Values* to explain—mountains and sheet lightning. In the first, people live in a valley for so long that they “come to believe nothing is real outside the valley” (102-03). Even though their religion predicts a higher life in the mountains when they die (the afterlife), no one “in his senses” tries to reach the mountains in this present life. The few who do are deemed impractical sleepwalkers, but in reality these are the ones really living life at the highest. In the second analogy, Neihardt portrays higher consciousness by comparing darkness to sheet lightning:

It is as though one were walking in a cloudy night with a lantern, the glow of which is turned upon a single tree; and the tree is all that is seen. Suddenly, an inundation of sheet lightning reveals the landscape of which the tree was all the while an integral part. It is a thrilling vision, and how shall it be told to men, who, for our purpose, may be conceived as knowing their world only as a lantern may reveal it? (109-110)

Living by sheet lightning, or in the mountains, constitutes what Neihardt deems “poetic values” (or higher or “outer” values) in which the creative vision lights up or ascends to

this higher consciousness, normally unperceived (Holloway 52). Given this framework, it is easy to see why Neihardt was attracted to Black Elk's vision and found in it verification of his poetic values, namely the creative dream as a conduit to higher consciousness. Martinez gives a similar description of Lakota vision as blurring the boundaries between the dream world and the supposedly "real" world: "One is simply opened up to experiencing *more than the ordinary*" (83) So, Neihardt was delighted when he and Black Elk seemed to share "an uncanny merging of consciousness." "A strange thing happened often while I was talking with Black Elk," he writes: "Over and over he seemed to be quoting from my poems, and sometimes I quoted some of my stuff to him...the old man immediately recognized the ideas as his own" (qtd. in Anderson 181).

As stated before, Neihardt's felt affinity with Black Elk was helped by his own boyhood vision that likely influenced his decision to center the Great Vision in *Black Elk Speaks*. Neihardt wrote about his boyhood vision in a poem entitled "The Ghostly Brother" or "The Calling Brother," essentially a poem about the creative dream. In the poem, the persona initially feels afraid and unhappy about being summoned into higher consciousness, much like a valley man being forcibly hauled to the mountains. He begs for rest: "Let me stop a little while, / Feel this snug world's pulses beat, / Glory in a baby's smile, / Hear it prattle, round my feet." He wants the "cosmic curtains" to be shut again so he can be "content with transient things" like other "witless" people who are content in the "Now." He complains, "I am breathless from the flight / Through the speed-cleft, awful night!" But the Ghostly Brother, or voice of higher consciousness, answers, "Brother, brother, break the gives! / Burst the prison, Son of Power!...What to

you are nights and days...Heir unto the Outer Awe?" He insists that the reluctant persona relinquish his affection for the mere ordinary: "When the world is cherished most, / You shall hear my haunting cry...Brother, Brother, follow me!...Only shadows linger here [on earth], Cast by the eternal Gleam!" He promises, "You shall lift the veil at last, / You shall look upon my face." A year after writing the poem, Neihardt visited a medium in Omaha who said she could see this ghostly brother standing beside him (a Scottish minister, oddly enough) (Anderson 98). Black Elk, Neihardt wrote, told him that "your Ghostly Brother has sent you here...You are here for the vision just the way I wanted" (qtd. in Anderson 181). More than a specific person, Scottish or otherwise, the Ghostly Brother represented to Neihardt the constant pressure he felt inside himself that kept him from being content with ordinary consciousness (Anderson 97-98).

Neihardt's aversion to living in the valley or by the lantern points to a larger backdrop of transcendentalism. American transcendentalism came about as part of a larger response to modern disenchantment, which Charles Taylor traces as the movement toward a secular age. In a shift away from the porosity of enchantment, the modern (post-medieval) West adopted a view of the self as "buffered," which I connect in earlier chapters to Per Hansa's strong self-reliance in *Giants in the Earth* and Jean Baptiste in *The Homesteader*. These protagonists, as we saw there, showcase the advantages of the buffered self in contrast to the porous self—invulnerability to outside forces of nature or gods, disempowerment of superstition and fear, a powerful sense of individual agency and importance (Taylor 301). While we call this shift disenchantment for how it sheds the transcendent, Taylor calls attention to how it also becomes disenchanting in the colloquial sense. Despite its advantages, many people in the disenchanted West felt an

accompanying “flatness,” the sense that “we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen” (302). This “loss of meaning,” Taylor argues, was a problem peculiar to modernity, and people started looking for renewed meaning in different ways. Although these seekers sometimes returned to pre-disenchantment Christianity, Taylor notes that many sought “a third way” that was neither a return to institutional faith nor a concession to modern disenchantment. Taylor terms this “the nova effect,” in which “more and more third ways are created” (302). One major third way was romanticism and its carryover to American transcendentalism which Neihardt inherited. Quoting Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thoreau, Taylor outlines a basic romantic theme of returning to nature to get back in touch with a sense of meaning (339-45). Reacting to disenchantment’s anthropocentric view of nature, Thoreau asks, “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (qtd. in Taylor 345). At Walden Pond he experiences a porosity with nature not unlike that of Black Elk’s: “I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me...and also that the nearest of blood to me and the humanist was not a person or a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.”

However, Taylor points out that romanticism, for all its kinship with nature, does not travel back toward the ordered cosmos of enchantment shed by the buffered self. Rather, it moves toward an understanding of the world as a “vastness of space” or “dark abyss” (342-43). This marks a distinction between transcendentalism and Black Elk’s view of nature as ordered relationships. Contrast Black Elk’s Great Vision, with its tight

structure of meaning-laden colors and numbers, with Thoreau's reaction to Mount Katahdin in Maine:

This was primeval, untamed nature...Nature here was something savage and awful, though beautiful...Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe...Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of...It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and wild animals than we. (qtd. in Taylor 341)

The contrasts between this passage and Black Elk's vision are replete. To achieve a visual parallel, picture Standing Bear's illustration of Black Elk in the quartered hoop of the world alongside a chaotic painting like Thomas Moran's *Chasm of the Colorado*. By imagining nature as a deep abyss, or as deep time or deep space, transcendentalism allows us to imagine ourselves with similarly deep natures; thus, getting in touch with the abyss of nature puts us in touch with our deeper selves (Taylor 344). Getting in touch with our deep selves through deep nature recalls Neihardt's commitment to higher consciousness. "The Ghostly Brother" speaks of "the Vast," "Outer Awe," and "Somewhere out of Time and Place," all names for deep nature. And the Ghostly Brother who conducts the persona to deep nature is in essence his own deep self: "*I am you and you are I!*"

But, while transcendentalism emphasizes immersion in deep nature as self-recovery, it is also invested in control of nature. Catherine Albanese analyzes two different strands of American transcendentalism that demonstrate this sustained tension between immersion and control. The first yields wilderness preservationists like John Muir, while the second explores the control of "mind over matter" through psychosomatic experiments like mind cure (105-06). While Neihardt is remembered for his nature poetry, he was in fact deeply invested in this second strand of

transcendentalism. John Thomas Richards details the psychokinetic experiments Neihardt conducted on his farm in Missouri over the course of two decades, for example, in conjunction with the Society for Research on Rapport and Telekinesis which he founded. In *Poetic Values* Neihardt recounts an anesthetized patient “comment[ing] on the facial expressions of those behind her and not visible to her in any physical sense” (100-01). He credits her report that she floated above her body during the operation which gave her a vantage to observe the whole room. In these respects he is not unlike Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Albanese’s prototype for mind-over-matter transcendentalism, who practiced magnetic healing on absent patients (107-08).

Both these qualities of transcendentalism, its potential for mind-over-matter and its deep nature, exhibit characteristics of the buffered self that distinguish Neihardt from Black Elk. First, by seeking out the deep self in the abyss of nature, transcendentalism remains preoccupied with the individual, and this individualism is a carryover from the buffered self. It explains why transcendentalist experiences in nature tend to be solitary rather than populated, since the purpose of entering deeply into nature is self-recovery; this is why Matthew Taylor calls Neihardt’s transcendentalism “therapeutic” and “self-serving” in contrast to Black Elk (1058). Thoreau finds himself by going into the woods alone: “When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp” (qtd. in Charles Taylor 345). Muir’s ecstatic experiences crouched over Yosemite’s falls or “perched like a fly” on its domes exhilarate, but do not commission him as a healer (221-222, 228). Second, the mind-over-matter strand of transcendentalism reveals its investment in gaining mastery over nature—a desire of the buffered self, as Per Hansa and Jean Baptiste memorably

demonstrate in their instrumentalizing quest for agricultural kingdoms. Neihardt's psychokinesis is an example of a related tendency that, in Matthew Taylor's words, is "lethal" in the Lakota mindset (1058). In each of these two areas, transcendentalism reveals its heritage of the buffered self, specifically its focus on individual importance and power.

"There is no question that John G. Neihardt was a Romantic," Linden states, "which may have affected some of *Black Elk Speaks*" (84). Although Neihardt insists upon the disappearance of the individual in *Poetic Values* (24, 26), vestiges of individualism—transcendentalism's heritage of the buffered self—surface in Black Elk's preoccupation with personal defeat and doubt. DeMallie's publication of *The Sixth Grandfather* clarified that the famous passages on defeat that bookend *Black Elk Speaks* are Neihardt's creation (77). When Black Elk says in the first chapter, "I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it," Neihardt speaks (1). In the last chapter Neihardt also speaks when Black Elk says, "I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing" (207). Several other passages reinforce the theme of self-doubt: "I wish and wish my vision could have been given to a man more worthy. I wonder why it came to me, a pitiful old man who can do nothing...I have done nothing with it" (138; see also 178, 182). Neihardt freely acknowledges the book's ending as his own creation, but his statement that it constitutes "what [Black Elk] would have said if he had been able" suggests a subconscious heritage of transcendentalist individualism (qtd. in Holloway 20). While Black Elk's supposed preoccupation with defeat in these statements could represent his own sense of porosity and weakness, Neihardt's rendering is unwittingly flavored with

the buffer of individualism. In reality, *Sixth Grandfather* records that Black Elk closed his interviews with Neihardt with the statement quoted earlier, which reflects hope and a whole-people mindset: “If I prosper, my people would also prosper...Our families will multiply and prosper after we get this tree to blooming” (294). In addition to the self-doubt and defeat Neihardt laces throughout *Black Elk Speaks*, it is possible that the theme of alienation owes itself to him as well. After the Great Vision Black Elk experiences spiritual loneliness: “As I lay there thinking about the wonderful place where I had been and all that I had seen, I was very sad; for it seemed to me that everybody ought to know about it, but I was afraid to tell...maybe all the people would think that I was crazy” (37-38). While it is certainly possible that Black Elk’s relational orientation would induce this alienation, Neihardt himself considered the life of a visionary to be lonely. “The Ghostly Brother” calls the creative vision a “lonesome, endless quest,” a view reflected in the title of Thomas Anderson’s recent biography *Lonesome Dreamer*, which focuses on Neihardt’s poetry and art. While Black Elk’s performance of his vision alleviates alienation by ushering it into the community, the transcendentalist has no parallel outlet from the deep woods. Neihardt’s transcendentalism thus laces strains of individualism through *Black Elk Speaks* that are distinct from the ordered relationships defining Black Elk’s voice.

Materialism and a Sense of Place

While the above readings parse Black Elk’s and Neihardt’s separate voices, the following highlights the theme which most draws them together—a sense of place amid the placelessness of modern materialism. This theme hearkens back to texts studied in earlier chapters, in which *Main Street* and *My Antonia* react to modern materialism while

Per Hansa and Jean Baptiste embrace and adapt it. In *Black Elk Speaks*, materialism becomes a significant theme in juxtaposition to the sense of place that takes definition against Black Elk's increasing contact with white culture. Materialism in the text corresponds with Charles Taylor's "terrible flatness of the everyday" unique to disenchanted modernity, which he notes is particularly felt in materialist culture: "They feel emptiness of the repeated, accelerating cycle of desire and fulfillment in consumer culture; the cardboard quality of bright supermarkets, or neat row housing in a clean suburb; the ugliness of slag heaps, or an aging industrial townscape" (309). Louis Warren observes that the "increasing rationalism" of modern life provoked longing for spiritual experiences in whites and Natives alike at the turn of the twentieth century (16). Vine Deloria opens his foreword to *Black Elk Speaks* by assessing the problem of twentieth century as such: "The opportunities for grasping the substance of life have faded as the pace of activity has increased. Electronic media...produce in us a strange isolation...and we avidly seek more avenues to express our humanity" (xiii). "How fortunate," he says in light of this milieu, that Black Elk and Neihardt produced *Black Elk Speaks*. Jerome McGann remarks that although the text is a nonnative telling of Native culture, it is also Native critique of nonnative culture, although Neihardt is but partially aware of this reciprocity (403, 420). Whether either was conscious of the extent of the other's critiques, both Black Elk and Neihardt reject materialism by affirming a sense of place, specifically through uniquely powerful locations in the Midwest. By doing so they spiritualize place as source of a well-being in an unfulfilling broader culture. Yet their critique of materialism initially builds on their respective commitments to ordered relationships and creative vision, meaning that they take different spiritual routes to a

sense of place. The resulting collaboration harmonizes their spiritual disparities in the text which houses them both.

Consistent with the prominent theme in the Great Vision, Black Elk's critique of modern materialism rests on his view of the world as an ordered cosmos. As Charles Taylor states, the cosmos patterns the order we should practice in our own lives, and aberration from these patterns disrupts order and well-being. When Black Elk explains his living situation on the Pine Ridge reservation, he exemplifies this principle: "You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles...The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles...Even the seasons form a great circle" (150). However, the cosmic pattern has been disrupted: "We made these little gray houses of logs that you can see, and they are square. It is a bad way to live, for there can be no power in a square...In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop." But because "the Wasichus put us in these square boxes," Black Elk continues, "our power is gone and we are dying" (151). One tangible evidence for this disruption is that boys reach manhood later than they used to: "Now it takes them very much longer to mature." This passage recalls Black Elk's island analogy, in which Wasichus' chaotic flood of greed severs ordered relationships among humans and places. Both islands and squares contrast the rightly ordered cosmic relationships that govern the Great Vision. When Black Elk states, "Only crazy or very foolish men would sell their Mother Earth," he indicates the real, not figurative, relationship between humans and the land (103). Similar to humans as "little chickens under the mother sheo's

wing” in the Great Vision (27), the order of parent-child locates humans beneath, not above, earth. Deloria observes, “In Black Elk’s visions we have a natural relationship to the rest of the cosmos” (“Foreword” xvi), and Black Elk sees materialist culture as disrupting these natural relationships.

Black Elk’s real relationship with the land entails a strong attachment that we might call a sense of place. When Black Elk is living in Paris (incidentally an “unexpected place” for a Lakota), he feels the separation from his homeland so acutely that he becomes physically ill: “I was more and more sick to go home all the time now...I could not think of anything else, and afterwhile this made me really sick...I could not be in the show because I was so sick now” (173). The result of this acute homesickness is a visionary experience in which he does in fact “go home for a while,” flying across the ocean on a cloud to the Black Hills, where he sees his family (173-74). The vision gives him the courage to leave Europe after he recovers, declining a job offer by boldly asking for a ticket home instead: “I told him I was sick to go home...We were on the water eight days. I was sick part of the time, but I was not sad, because I was going home” (175). Black Elk’s homesickness and vision journey demonstrate what Philip Arnold calls “a cosmos expressed in the land”; for the Lakota, the Black Hills particularly were a place of unique power (93). Arnold contrasts Black Elk’s attachment to specific places with materialism’s commoditization of land through property and ownership rather than relationship (86-87). Rather than viewing land as property, Black Elk cares for and about specific places in his homeland like one might care for a certain person. Martinez applies Edward Casey’s commitment of care to the Lakota’s commitment to their homeland of the Black Hills: “We care about places as well as

people, so much so that we can say that *caring belongs to places*" (87). One dimension of this care is what Arnold terms "sacred landscape" (87); as Jeffrey Ostler says, "The Plains were filled with sacred places" (237). When Black Elk travels from Paris in his vision he recognizes "the Black Hills and the center of the world where the spirits had taken me in my great vision" (174). Thus he is distressed by white seizure of the Black Hills because he remembers his visionary experience there (62); in another passage he is upset to find a "holy place" "all cut up with shod hoofs and made dirty with horse droppings" from a soldier party (100). Seizure of the Black Hills and the reservation system disrupted Lakota life at a fundamental level, not simply for the loss of land itself but, as Deloria states, because ceremonies and rituals could only be "performed as a condition of living in certain places" ("Out of Chaos" 259, 265). The ritual of the vision quest, for instance, "expresses a connection to place that is inextricable" (Martinez 97). For Black Elk, the particular places of the Black Hills and the Pine Ridge reservation are so entwined with his well-being that dismemberment from them harms his own body.

In contrast to the relationship with place that determines his own well-being, Black Elk finds that materialist culture devalues relationship and place. Concerned that his people are adopting a mentality of "everybody for himself and with little rules of his own," Black Elk joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West show to see if he can learn "some secret of the Wasichu that would help my people" (165). But the tour through major U.S. cities confirms the island mentality of broader materialist culture:

I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation's hoop was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving. They had forgotten that the earth was their mother. (167)

In this critique, Black Elk shows that “the white man’s spirit land is no where,” to borrow another Lakota’s phrase (Walker et al. 72). Or, in McGann’s words, Black Elk shows that “the wasichu world has no center. Its driving historical purposiveness is, paradoxically, self-centered” (420). In other words, materialism demotes relationship with others (both human and places) and elevates consumption, which results in disordered placelessness for the consumer and others alike. This mindset is at play when Black Elk calls the whites “crazy” over gold and bison in the Black Hills, even though the metal was “not good for anything” and some hunters killed without harvesting even the tongues of the bison (60, 164). Arnold calls it “consumerist utopianism” and “optimism of placelessness,” which diametrically opposes the Lakota cosmos of ordered relationships and sense of place (102-03). Vine Deloria calls it a “plush fantasy desert” or a loaded Christmas tree, a “chaotic and extreme individualism” which disqualifies white lifestyle as a replacement for Lakotas’ former way of life (“Out of Chaos” 265-67). The contrast between the two worldviews goes back to Charles Taylor’s buffered self, particularly how the buffered self views land. As I explored earlier in Jean Baptiste’s view of his homestead, the buffered self achieves a sense of sovereignty that enables it to commodify land and detach from place, a shift that Wendell Berry critiques. When the self is defined by its possessions rather than its obligations to a specific place, the result is the placelessness Berry finds in the modern home. “In an automated kitchen, in a gleaming, odorless bathroom, in year-round air-conditioning, in color TV, in an easy chair,” Berry says, one is “everywhere or nowhere” (*Unsettling* 56-57). The alternative, as Berry shows, is a sense of obligation and affection for one’s homeland that amounts to love: “I would like [my country] to be loved with a minutely particular affection and

loyalty” (“Argument for Diversity” 545). From a different vantage and decade, this statement offers the same “caring belongs to places” that Martinez locates in Black Elk’s attachment to the Black Hills, in contrast to the placelessness of materialism.

Neihardt offers his own substantive critique of materialism in *Poetic Values*. Unlike Black Elk, Neihardt levels these critiques on the basis of higher consciousness, which helps distinguish his voice from Black Elk’s. Neihardt’s goal in critiquing materialism is to “awaken” his readers to the higher consciousness he experienced in his own creative vision, in essence to get others to live on a higher plane (Holloway 58). In *Poetic Values* Neihardt faults materialism primarily for deluding people to be content with living a merely material existence, or living in the valley instead of on the mountaintop. Even though people pretend to lay up treasures in heaven, Neihardt calls economics the real American gospel, its banking houses the true temples—the same unacknowledged gods Per Hansa adopts as a buffered self (*Poetic* 11-14). And, similar to Jacques Ellul’s critique of technics in *Jean Baptiste*, Neihardt critiques scientific or mechanical measurement as the new value system. In the same spirit as Ellul’s quip—you can’t argue with an airplane that flies six hundred miles an hour—Neihardt says, “We have learned how to fly and are greatly excited about it, but it is probable that the gray goose and crane are not greatly impressed...The degree of the going is altered, but not the quality of that which goes” (41). Like Ellul, he asks why we should communicate faster if we have nothing worth communicating or fight tuberculosis if we have nothing worth living for (42). Most people, he finds, do not raise their minds above the game to ask. Like Rolvaag, who calls greedy farmers earthworms, Neihardt remarks, “Hogs fighting for the swill are quite sincere—no less so than men gambling for wealth on the

stock exchange” (46). To convey the alternative of higher consciousness, Neihardt gives an analogy of a hickory tree: Imagine yourself before a beautiful hickory tree. You intend to cut it down for firewood, but as you gaze at it in the quiet of the woods, it stops being firewood and becomes “the ecstatic upward suck of resurrected life through bole and branch and twig, almost as though the body of the tree were your own. And there will be something very much like love in the sense” (71-73). Neihardt believes this transformation is already stirring in mainstream culture in its yearning for “the ‘more’” (140). He concludes *Poetic Values* with the hope that American society will exchange materialism (the valley, the lantern) for the higher consciousness of creative vision (the mountains, the sheet lightning).

Despite the difference between Neihardt’s creative vision and Black Elk’s ordered relationships, Neihardt also reacts to the placelessness of materialism. As we saw earlier in Thoreau, the heritage of transcendentalism seeks intimacy with nature as a way back to one’s deep self, which is a different route than Black Elk’s but results in an overlapping emphasis on place. Deloria studies Neihardt’s “intimacy with the land” in his analysis of region in Neihardt’s poetry, a sense of place which Arnold also takes up (*Sender* 98, Arnold 94-95). Although other works are more remembered for their sense of place, Neihardt’s poem “Lonesome in Town” is particularly interesting for how it compares to Black Elk’s Paris homesickness in longing for a specific location. Both poems are set in cities where each feels longing for one’s home place, Black Elk for Pine Ridge and Neihardt for a certain Nebraska farm. Young Neihardt wrote “Lonesome in Town” the night he got fired from his job as a newspaper reporter for the *Omaha Daily Times* (Anderson 38-40). Feeling the failure of his first attempt to make it in the city, Neihardt

contrasts the rainy city to his uncle's farm outside his hometown of Wayne, Nebraska.

He first communicates the peculiar loneliness of nighttime in the city:

In vain the bargain windows wink,
The passers-by are few:
The grim walls stretch away and shrink
In dull electric blue.

With a nod to materialism, Neihardt would later quip that "towns, after all, are machines to facilitate getting psychically lost" (qtd. in Anderson 79). In contrast to the placelessness of town, the poem's final two stanzas travel home, not unlike Black Elk does in his vision:

A stranger hurries down the street,
Hat dripping, face aglow:
O happy feet, O homing feet,
I know where mine would go!

For there, far over hills and dells
The cows come up the lane,
With steaming flanks and fog-dulled bells
That tinkle in the rain.

The sense of place in these stanzas is poignant, and it arises from Neihardt's attachment to a specific Midwest home he finds uniquely powerful. However, Arnold raises a provocative suggestion about what makes Neihardt's sense of place different from Black Elk's—"the modern existential dilemma of understanding the Self as being materially constituted by a place (dubbed South Dakota, Kansas, or America) but never being able to ask the religious question of what that place means" (104). Casting our eye back over the transcendentalism that is Neihardt's heritage, we see a different route to the importance of place via the deep abyss of space and self versus Black Elk's ordered cosmos. While both sacralize place, Arnold's critique accurately detects a different timbre in Neihardt's spirituality that resonates with existential modernity. But this same

modernity has also affected Black Elk's sense of place; having travelled the world and felt homesick in it, he comprehends the placelessness of materialism as well as the possibility of conceiving place in the abstract. When Black Elk identifies Harney Peak as the center of the world in the Great Vision, Neihardt records in a footnote that he added, "But anywhere is the center of the world" (33).

Whether this remark is more the voice of Black Elk or Neihardt is difficult to discern. It points to the distinctive of their collaboration—a sense of place that amounts to a third way made possible by the spiritual nova that Charles Taylor describes. Lakotas, other Natives, and nonnatives can all identify with aspects of this sense of place even though it matches no single group. *Black Elk Speaks* thus embodies in a single work of art how various modern selves corporately make up the spiritual nova of their milieu. By doing so, it exemplifies the window of opportunity for new Native-white relations that Deloria calls attention to in the early twentieth century. Especially for how it treats the problem of placelessness amid disorienting materialism, it positions itself as a Native participant in intercultural dialogue about a specifically modern condition. In Arnold's words, it suggests how "Native American traditional practices continue to stand as a critique of modern life" (Arnold 108). The fact that Arnold draws this general insight about Natives from a Lakota text indicates just how strong the third way voice is heard in *Black Elk Speaks*. When Sherman Alexie remarks that "books about the Sioux sell more copies than all of the books written about other tribes combined," his quip implicitly names this third-way quality in a text like *Black Elk Speaks*, which allows it to supersede its own locality and represent concerns of other or larger groups (20). While the popularity of *Black Elk Speaks* contributes to the study of Plains Natives' relation to

other Natives, more importantly it speaks to how the text's window of opportunity opens upon a landscape populated by many groups. These groups, ranging from Lakotas to other Natives to white readers, sense a disorienting placelessness felt in different ways but commonly experienced as a condition of modernity. Disparate audiences can find that *Black Elk* speaks to this condition because the landscape of the spiritual nova makes such a window of opportunity comprehensible.

Landscape of the Nova

As we have seen, tracing Neihardt's creative vision and Black Elk's ordered relationships throughout *Black Elk Speaks* does not so much strain apart their separate voices as it shows their collaboration to be a creation of secularity. What implications does such collaboration hold in a secular age for issues of religious appropriation and influence? This chapter began with Charles Taylor's definition of secularity—belief as one possibility among others—and the resulting spiritual nova of modernity in which more and more ways of believing are generated. Amanda Porterfield identifies *Black Elk Speaks* as exactly this for modern America, a “harbinger” of “new American culture” which reflects “the increasing diversity of our own religious situation” and the “abundance of different religious options” as individuals ease in and out of religions and harmonize different options (53). Warren charts how a shared reaction to materialism helped spawn a spread of different movements; for example, the concurrent movements of the Ghost Dance and charismatic Pentecostalism in the United States (15-18). Porterfield examines how transcendentalism's foundation in popular consciousness became the waters for *Black Elk Speaks* to swim in, arguing that the text could not have become so popular if transcendentalism had not already primed readers to appreciate

spiritual experiences in nature (47-52). This multifarious interaction between different spiritual movements distinguishes modernity as an unprecedented secular age, as Taylor argues, with new problems.

One of these problems is the question of spiritual appropriation, especially difficult in a Native-white collaboration like *Black Elk Speaks*. The positions on spiritual appropriation in the text range widely, from Julian Rice's early contention that Neihardt imposed Protestant manifest destiny onto the text, to Steltenkamp's argument for Black Elk's sincere conversion to Catholicism, to David Delgado Shorter's assertion that "spirituality" is an inappropriate term for Native worldviews entirely. Some of this debate revolves around the concept of the native informant, taking up Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" for Black Elk (25). Holler devotes his seminal contribution to arguing that "it is a very serious mistake to characterize Black Elk as an informant" (*Religion* xxviii). But what should we think, for instance, about Black Elk's prayer at the dedication of Mount Rushmore? (Steltenkamp 150). Or on another hand, in Pekka Hämäläinen's words, the "culture vultures" who enter "sacred Lakota sites to perform bastardized versions of Lakota religious ceremonies"? (389). Secularity engenders these problems because, as Charles Taylor points out, other people's belief becomes a legitimate personal option: "Why my way, and not hers?" (304). While religious pluralism existed in a pre-secular era, it produced a different set of problems because adherents were less likely to consider other religions as thinkable options for themselves: "Becoming *that* isn't really conceivable for me." But in the secular milieu, Porterfield observes, it becomes "increasingly more awkward and difficult" to conceive of Native religions as "Other," a shift which includes benefits as

well as new problems (53). N. Scott Momaday implicitly acknowledges this shift when he calls *Black Elk Speaks* “an extraordinarily human document”: “By this I mean not that this account tells us of the Oglala Sioux, or even that it reveals to us the extraordinary man Black Elk (or indeed, that other extraordinary man, John Neihardt), but that it tells us of ourselves and of all humankind” (31-32).

Momaday’s provocative comment gestures toward a school of thought that responds to appropriation through influence. That is, the appropriation problem can become a jumping-off point for expanding the influence of Native religions. Deloria’s essay “Out of Chaos” exemplifies this approach: The fact that Natives are “plagued with a multitude of wellwishers and spectators” seeking spiritual edification indicates that Natives hold the “last best hope for spiritual renewal in a world dominated by material considerations” (267-68). Deloria suggests that Natives “develop a new interpretation of their religious tradition with a universal application” and “seek out areas in which they could communicate with sympathetic people in the larger society” (267-68). John Neihardt’s prefaces to *Black Elk Speaks* and Black Elk’s active collaboration with Neihardt attempt this (“It has been my purpose to bring Black Elk’s message to the white world as he wished me to do,” xxix). Deloria’s compilation of tribute essays to Neihardt as *A Sender of Words* commends the effort, as does Ella Cara Deloria’s letter to Neihardt upon reading *Black Elk Speaks*: “I never knew until now how [Lakota visions’] meaning could be expressed in such a way as to be understandable to people of such a material civilization as this” (qtd. in Anderson 191). This influence approach to appropriation could be understood as one way Natives reconfigure adverse circumstances to their advantage. Contrary to reductions of Natives as both pre-modern and victims, a major

theme in recent scholarship endeavors to show the many ways Natives have “shape-shifted” or reinvented themselves in new situations. This theme, which could be summarized “flexible modernizing,” drives works like Philip Deloria’s *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Warren’s *God’s Red Son*, and Pekka Hämäläinen’s *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power*. Deloria’s suggestion that Natives communicate a universal application of their religions to sympathetic people applies the principle of flexible modernizing to the problem of materialist culture in a secular age.

By contributing to the appropriation debate, *Black Elk Speaks* portrays the Midwest as a landscape of the spiritual nova, a place that epitomizes the condition of secularity which defines modernity. Rather than a flatland of homogeneity, the Midwest’s reputation in the early twentieth century as the nation’s heartland owed itself not just to agriculture but to a diverse cultural topography. Historians like Jon Lauck have worked to recover the Midwest’s heritage of heterogeneous modernity in projects like *Warm Center to Ragged Edge*, and Black Elk and Neihardt compellingly represent the multifarious possibilities of belief that the Midwest offered. While *Black Elk Speaks* focuses on Black Elk’s Lakota religion, Steltenkamp’s scholarship has brought attention to his conversion to Catholicism and extensive work as a catechist on the Pine Ridge reservation and surrounding areas. To ongoing debate about Black Elk’s Lakota religion and Catholicism, Holler and Holloway have convincingly argued that “syncretism” best describes the relationship (Holler, *Religion* 213-17; Holloway 16-17). As Steltenkamp points out, Black Elk’s selective incorporation of Catholicism into his Lakota beliefs is an example of flexible modernizing (7-8), one that exemplifies the interior of the modern self that *Black Elk Speaks* itself demonstrates. Neihardt, for his part, abandoned his

Methodist background as a boy and, influenced by two older agnostics in his hometown of Wayne, Nebraska, acquired the habit of making fun of institutionalized religion and local churches (Anderson 21-23). These men also introduced him to Eastern religions, and one of his first publications was a poem about Nirvana (as creative vision) entitled *The Divine Enchantment* (24-25). He believed in the paranormal and in mystical experiences (Holloway 7). “The essence of religion is *mystical experience*,” he wrote to a friend, and “many, many times I have tried most sincerely to get an explanation of the salvation-through-Jesus affair, and *no one* has ever been able to give me any sane explanation” (qtd. in Holloway 61). But, true to the spirit of spiritual nova, he adds, “I never speak against churches openly, because they *do* stand for spiritual aspiration.”

Hardly a homogenous Midwest. Like its collaborators, *Black Elk Speaks* harmonizes multiple possibilities of belief within itself. Neither Black Elk nor Neihardt yet both, *Black Elk Speaks* creates its own third way, something entirely new, like the photograph of Red Cloud Woman under the hair dryer in a salon. More than simply showing the spiritual diversity of the Midwest, this third way stands out most sharply in the sense of place which preserves human well-being in a placeless world. For Black Elk and Neihardt, the Midwest is *the* place where they can hope to live well by relating to sites of home like the Black Hills or the farm outside Wayne, Nebraska. Although they begin from different spots, their convergence on the sense of place is the single point where their voices truly produce something new. This peculiarly modern sense of place sustains the text’s appeal across audiences for how it embodies the condition of secularity at the heart of twentieth-century modernity and the new possibilities this condition generates. One example of these possibilities might be the critique that Black Elk’s

orientation of ordered relationships offers for a growing ecological consciousness still embedded in transcendentalism individualism. Porterfield suggest something akin to this when she hypothesizes a “maturation of transcendentalism” that is more “community oriented” (57-58). Whatever concrete forms such possibilities may take, examining the third-way quality of *Black Elk Speaks* undertakes Philip Deloria’s challenge raised at the opening of this chapter to study the brief window in the early twentieth century for a “new script” of Indian-white relations (225-26). Deloria states that although that window closed, its study holds current insights. This chapter has examined *Black Elk Speaks* for its insights into the condition of modern secularity, particularly how its collaborative quality communicates the essence of the spiritual nova and the modern self. Charles Taylor posits that the West is transitioning into a post-secular age which will continue to expand the possibilities of belief, which Black Elk and Neihardt capture for the modern American moment: “We are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee” (535).

Note

1. *The Sixth Grandfather* will be abbreviated as *SG* and *Black Elk Speaks* as *BES* in in-text citations.

Conclusion

Through the texts examined in its chapters, this project offers different windows into the Midwest that together argue for a particular meaning of the region. While the windows feature different viewpoints, they open up onto a shared landscape of possibility in the early twentieth century, which is the first major argument about the Midwest advanced this project. The second is that the seemingly endless potential of this landscape is limitless specifically in terms of its possibilities for belief. Secularity, defined as possibilities for belief, thus becomes central to the meaning of the Midwest at the historical juncture of the project. The region appears as a spiritual nova, in which the options for belief continually expand. The third major argument is that although secularization has broadly characterized the West since the Renaissance, the early twentieth-century Midwest peculiarly hosted this process as a subaltern heartland of the United States.

While I have argued frankly for these concepts as the meaning of the Midwest, a further implication emerges in rear view of the project. Is disenchantment sustainable? The previous chapter concluded by affirming the unpredictability of secularization's endpoint, yet the protagonists in this project seem to slope toward forms of belief even when they pursue buffered selfhood. Representing the spectrum of the Midwest as they do, they imply that belief persists in reattracting humans even after unbelief has become comprehensible.

No period in the modern Midwest was perhaps more disenchanting than the Dust Bowl and Great Depression years. Frederick Feikema Manfred's *The Golden Bowl* depicts the physical and moral devastation of this period through its protagonist Maury, a

wandering ex-farmer. Maury's bitter cynicism about the Midwest comes into conflict with Pa Thor, a farmer who boards Maury and maintains faith in the land despite his failing farm. While Maury represents the apex of disenchantment with the Midwest—a land of impossibility in his eyes—Pa Thor represents an almost naïve belief in the land as a golden bowl of possibilities: “There’s been gold corn an’ wheat an’ hay an’ buffalo grass in the fall, an’ gold pheasants an’ cows an’ women, all gold...It’s been full a gold before an’ it’ll be full a gold again...so I’m not an empty man. Don’t ever say that again” (132). Maury retorts, “I can’t see them dreams fer this godfersaken country...you’ve been blinded by fool’s gold.”

Angered by Pa Thor's foolish faith, Maury packs his bags to leave but stops to say goodbye to Pa Thor's daughter Kirsten. Not yet knowing she is pregnant through him, he is arrested by a vision of her twenty years into the future: “She would be entering a church. Behind her would come young, pretty daughters, fluttering their new hats and handkerchiefs. Outside, still talking...would be a patch of young sons, young, strong, blond-haired bulls of the land. The image cut him” (137). At the height of his disbelief in the Midwest, Maury finds himself spellbound by visions of belief—church, but also reproduction and a new generation birthed by the land. Although Maury walks away from this vision, the Thors' faith in the land in the face of its desolation haunts him, and no one seems surprised when he eventually reappears at the Thor farm just as another dust storm begins. But Maury's transformation has occurred: This time, he says, “If it blows the house down, we’ll build another...That big black devil ain’t gonna do us in” (221, 223). As Maury utters these words, the storm seems to retreat, and an astonished Maury finds himself chuckling with Pa Thor and Kirsten. The book closes with a

description of an imagined Midwest future: “In the hidden country of the pilgrim’s heart, rains are falling...Men go into the fields and work, and believe in the work of their hands...And it is safe for the young lads to squire the girls, and to mate, and have children” (225-26).

The Golden Bowl is about the despair of disenchantment, yet it ends at a place more magical than other Midwesterns examined in this project. Its squires epitomize the bright futures prophesied for the Midwest in the early twentieth century, which even a novel about its ruins eventually upholds. Maury’s reconversion to faith in the Midwest joins Jim Burden’s faith in Antonia, John Baptiste’s in rural race materialism, Black Elk’s and Neihardt’s in the power of special places—a diverse company who collectively suggest that disenchantment remains evasive in a secular age, even as modern variations of enchantment expand.

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