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by members of*

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*edited by*  
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In honor of  
Jon Hassler



## PREFACE

*Midwestern Miscellany* ranges widely over the Midwestern cultural landscape in its second appearance (Fall 1998) this year in its most recent incarnation. In time, it ranges from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth; in place, it extends from Eastern Ohio to the Upper Great Lakes country and beyond; in subject matter, it includes works as diverse as conventional criticism, personal experience, and memoirs. Yet beyond that apparent diversity is the single narrative of the attempt to come to terms with the place and time in which the Midwest and its people came into being and to define the relationship of individual human beings, past and present, to those elements that have given and continue to give the Midwest its peculiar identity.

Fitting, then, is the dedication of this issue to Jon Hassler, distinguished novelist and recipient of the Mark Twain Award of 1997.

November, 1998

DAVID D. ANDERSON



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WHY “IT’S CRAZY TO STAY CHINESE IN  
MINNESOTA”: A MEDITATION ON  
DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

ROGER JIANG BRESNAHAN

Eleanor Wong Telemaque’s memoir, *It’s Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota* (1978) is a title that has been shifting around my working bibliography for many years, even surviving the transition from 3 x 5 cards to hypertext. Just below the fully conscious level in my ruminations about race in America, the title is one that I have long thought I would eventually have use for. The book itself, however, has proved remarkably elusive. Indeed, when I went to find it I discovered that the title I had inscribed in my memory and in my bibliographies must only have been an approximate one. When I described my problem—finding a book for which I had only an approximate title—on my department’s listserv, I got several helpful responses, one with the actual title. Thus armed, I accessed the electronic catalogue of my university’s library but found no listing. The University of Michigan Library? None. Surely the University of Minnesota Library? None. The Big Ten and CIC Libraries? Ah, two hits: Detroit Public Library, where it’s listed as a juvenile title, and Purdue. I filed an interlibrary loan request and waited. As I did so, the idea of this paper grew to encompass an autobiography by James D. Corrothers, who was born in the Cass County, Michigan, settlement that had arisen from a station on the underground railway and who grew up in the vicinity of South Haven and Muskegon on Lake Michigan. In contrast to Booker T. Washington’s fawning *Up from Slavery*, the Corrothers title, *In Spite of the Handicap* (1916) implies the same in-your-face approach to race in America that W. E. B. DuBois had revealed in the early chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

I only heard once from the interlibrary loan office at the MSU Library. That was the overdue notice chastising me for abusing the privileges upon which we all depend. It was beginning to appear that there were powerful forces preventing me from reading or even holding that book. Still, I was hopeful as I went over to the library to straighten out the confusion. If they have sent an overdue notice, I reasoned, that must mean they still have it over there somewhere and I can at least have it overnight. No book.! Lost? Never borrowed? Returned without ever notifying me, the patron? Stymied, I have gave up finding the actual volume, for the time being.

Still, the title is one to conjure with, is it not? It encapsulates what Myrdal called "The American Dilemma"—what to do about race in our country. Surely it would be good if families in Minnesota could "stay Chinese." It would be good for an immigrant family's sense of self-worth. And surely it would be good for Minnesota! Same for everywhere else in this country. Yet the title implies the failure of the American experiment in a way that should make us all feel ashamed. The confirmation of that failure is that the title probably does not inspire shame but resignation. The title tends, I think, to confirm common-sense values in American society, while it reveals its own impossibility. These ruminations led me to that remarkably accurate, yet stunningly cynical, American figure of speech concerning "a Chinaman's chance" or "a Chinaman's choice." Yes, it IS crazy to stay Chinese in America, in the Midwest, or in Minnesota, yet America, the Midwest, or Minnesota will not allow any other solution.

Oddly, it would NOT be crazy to stay Scandinavian in Minnesota. Then the only drawback would be Garrison Keillor's sort of fond mocking of one's cultural heritage in a way that actually reaffirms its centrality rather than reinforcing its marginality. Eventually I did find the book and, as I had suspected, it's title is problematic: except for Eleanor, the Wing family does choose the "CRAZY" option to stay Chinese, though they discover that Minnesota is too isolated to sustain their ethnic identity.

Though classified as juvenile fiction by the Library of Congress, the book is a memoir of Eleanor Wong (Wing in the book) and her family in the late '40s or early '50s just prior to her departure for the state university in Minneapolis. The setting is a town near the Iowa border where the Wings run a Chinese restaurant. They are the only Chinese in town, though they are frequently visited by somewhat

well-off relatives from Austin. Throughout this time, the family is expecting their lease on the restaurant to be renewed. In the end, though, it is not and the many white friends the Wings thought they had cultivated over the years were unable to help. The family is saved by the head of a powerful tong organization, but they must retreat to San Francisco.

For the Wing family, then, attempts at integrating into the social fabric of the town are thwarted. They learn that one can "stay Chinese" only with the mutual support of others of identical ethnicity, and that for Chinese the possibility cannot exist in Minnesota. For Eleanor's experience, too, the title is problematic. As she waits on the platform for the train that will take her to Minneapolis—a seemingly self-conscious echo of George Willard's departure from Winesburg—she is speaking to a young man from China who has been living with her family. Though she is in love with him, it is clear that he will leave the United States to help build a new society in China. It is in this connection he reminds her that she is "Chinese ... but mostly American," to which she replies, "I think that's good. ... It's crazy to stay Chinese in Minnesota" (118). Although Eleanor knows from her experience in high school that she will always be marginalized, she also knows that she really cannot be fully Chinese in Minnesota.

Similarly, W. E. B. DuBois chose to stay Negro, the term then in common usage to describe his otherness. He begins *The Souls of Black Folk* with a clear statement of the issue:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, "I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word." (1)

When Americans of the majority culture—whites—are talking about race, they are almost always talking about a vastly different issue than Americans of minority cultures, except to the extent that

they have made a deliberate effort to understand the other's point of view. And that only partially. That difference became apparent very early in the American discourse on race, as is evident in the dispute concerning race and individual talent that involved Jefferson and Banneker. Writing in general terms, ostensibly to Condorcet, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson expressed such virulently racist beliefs about the intellectual and creative capacities of African descendants as are hard to reconcile with the popular conception of the man: "Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the white; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous" (Query XIV, 266). Only reluctantly was he drawn to speculate on individual cases, most notably when Benjamin Banneker took issue with these views, presenting his own accomplishments in complex astronomical calculations required for his almanac. Jefferson responded to Banneker that the deficiencies he had observed might be the result of "the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America" as he insisted that "no body wishes more ardently" to ameliorate their condition "as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit" (982). Years later, writing to Joel Barlow, Jefferson was less generous in his appraisal of Banneker: though exceptionally talented in his own right, he could not possibly have achieved the distinction he had without white help. (Kaplan 123)

Right from the beginning, whites have tended to speak of race in impersonal and collective terms while blacks and others have tended to see it in individual and personal terms. Banneker sought to soften Jefferson's conception by demonstrating his own competence in exactly those mathematical and scientific pursuits that Jefferson most valued. And Jefferson steadfastly refused to acknowledge those individual talents lest he be forced to concede his blanket denunciation of the race. Even now that we know that race is not a biological determinant but a social construction, Americans of the majority culture and those of minority cultures still tend to talk past one another. Nothing, I think, has brought that so clearly into the public forum as the division of opinion along racial lines in the O. J. Simpson murder case and the Tawanna Brawley kidnapping and assault. In both instances, African Americans have tended to believe that O. J. wa

railroaded by the police and that Tawanna Brawley was victimized by law enforcers precisely because those patterns fit their experience. And Euro-Americans, whose experience tends to confirm the protective role of the police, have tended to believe that Simpson killed his ex-wife and that Brawley made up the whole story.

To return, then, to W. E. B. DuBois and the unmasked-and-unanswered question. DuBois narrates the incident where race first impacted upon his world, and thus his encounter with what whites have liked to call "the race problem." The story of the girl who refused his visiting-card is well known, as is the reaction of DuBois as a young child:

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep though; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination time, or beat them at a foot-race; or even beat their stringy heads. (2)

In this first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," DuBois introduces several concepts embedded within the various narratives that follow. One of these is the veil, a notion very like the more contemporary one of the glass ceiling. The metaphor is a powerful one because it is individualistic. The veil allows one to see the other world but imperfectly. And even if one individual is able to creep through, the veil still remains for all others in the stigmatized group. For example, the veil was parted by the magnates of American industry for Booker T. Washington, whom they greatly admired, when they arranged for him to receive an honorary doctorate, which meant they could call him "Doctor Washington" rather than the socially problematic "Mister" or the embarrassingly demeaning "Booker." Likewise, rather than permit Washington to be subjected to the personal indignities of Jim Crow travel, George Pullman had a private rail car backed down the Tuskegee Institute's rail siding. Significantly, though, the veil is parted in this and other instances for the convenience of the dominant culture rather than those behind. Its effect, these accommodations served to avoid unpleasanties rather than to ameliorate the larger social context.

The corollary to the notion of the veil is what DuBois calls “ever feeling his two-ness,” that is, his gift of second sight—seeing the world both as an American and as a Negro:

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconcilable strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

“The history of the American Negro,” DuBois tells us, “is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (2). Calling for “co-worker(s) in the kingdom of culture,” DuBois says the American Negro “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both : Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (3).

Just as DuBois shows that physical prowess was for him, and by implication for all Negroes in America, a prerequisite of mental and social advancement, Corrothers writes of necessary battles in his youth. “In those days, that part of Michigan was pretty rough, as all newly settled communities are. People loved fisticuffs. Being the only coloured boy in the village, I had to thrash nearly every whit boy in town before I was allowed to go to school in peace.” (22) Flogged without reason by his teachers, he came back each time with his books, ready to study and thus gained some measure of respect. In this incident, and elsewhere in the opening chapter, Corrothers makes it clear that Negroes in the North in the generation following the Civil War were neither welcome nor understood. Of the teacher who flogged him he concedes with second sight, “Some of the teachers, like the children, had, perhaps, never seen a coloured boy before.” (23) Indeed, after narrating several similar instances he italicizes his point: “*The North was not used to coloured people.*” (24) However accommodating on an individual basis, however willing

somewhat lift the veil on a personal basis, these largely white towns could suddenly grow intolerant, as in his description of the South Haven race riot that occurred when the town was filled with excursioners from Chicago and Kalamazoo and "the Negroes were beaten, and chased like rabbits." (29)

Through his young manhood James Corrothers worked a variety of jobs in the lumber town of Muskegon, in Chicago, and throughout northern Indiana and Ohio. At Springfield, Ohio, where he spent some time, he had a poem published in the local newspaper, *The Champion City Times*. Reminiscent of Jefferson's skepticism concerning Banneker's abilities, the wife of his employer repeatedly asked "'You wrote it, but who was the author of it.'" (63)

In the late 1880s, when Corrothers was about twenty, he went to work as a porter in the counting-room at the *Chicago Tribune* where he learned again the meaning of the veil. Called into the office of William Bross, he learned of his deceased predecessor who had worked there faithfully for twenty years and was told, "if *you* can be a good boy, James, you can remain here for twenty years. Corrothers' comment on this incident reveals the sort of double-consciousness DuBois had written of:

Mr. Bross was no doubt a sincere friend of my race. As Lieutenant-Governor of Illinois, from 1865 to 1869, when Illinois was the first state to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Mr. Bross, as presiding officer of the state senate, had been the first person to sign it. But I saw by the position he had taken in his conversation with me that he considered the Negro an undeveloped man, fitted only for the most humble things in life. Upon this plane he was willing to help him, and to stand by him. He never dreamed a Negro could *want* anything different. (81-82)

Later on, assigned to do a story, in his spare time, about the economic improvement of the citizens of color in Chicago, he found that his subjects were wary of newspapermen because "coloured people had been so persistently misrepresented by the Northern press in those days" and that "even intelligent coloured people were made to say 'dis' and 'dat' in the average newspaper, and sometimes ludicrously misrepresented as carrying a 'rabbit's foot' or a razor. (82-83) The care he took in representing people accurately was to naught, however, as a rewrite man repeated all those linguistic stereotypes and even depicted some of the most prominent African American cit-

izens of Chicago in the most virulently racist caricatures generated by the minstrel shows: "... nearly every sentence of my story had been recast into what was then the customary newspaper way of speaking of coloured folk." (84) Asking the editor to right the wrong by giving him the chance to be a reporter, he found that "the apparent ludicrousness of (the) request made him laugh outright." Told to stick to his place ("You already have a better job than the average coloured fellow of your age") he experienced "a bitter realization crept" over him—"the boding anathema of my colour!" (85)

Similar experiences are retold by Corrothers throughout the rest of the book, continuing through his variously intertwined vocations of student, newspaper features writer, teacher, preacher, and minister. In time, though, Corrothers became a somewhat well known poet, even trying his hand at dialect poems under the guidance of his good friend, Paul Laurence Dunbar. And like DuBois, he began to see that in his published work, particularly his poetry, he could make use of his second-sight. "I considered that I was making a new start in literature; and that I was working for my *race*, as well as for myself and family." (229) His work appeared in DuBois's *Crisis*, Gilder's *The Century*, Hampton Institute's *The Southern Workman*, *The American Magazine*, and the leading newspapers of the North. The quality of second-sight and "ever feeling one's two-ness," as enunciated by DuBois, together with an acute consciousness of the veil informs Corrothers' poetry. Among the better known and more frequently anthologized of his poems are "The Negro Singer"—his tribute to Dunbar—, "At the Closed Gate of Justice," "The Dream and the Song," "The Complaint of the Sorehead," "An Indignation Dinner," "Mammy's Growin' Ole," and "The Shadow on a Race." His work with dialect required him to learn a poetic language with which he was not familiar. Though he "had always detested dialect" on account of its stereotypical connotations, he found in Dunbar's use of dialect "a new dignity and beauty" together with "splendid material which I had overlooked, and which all Negroes but Dunbar had allowed to go begging. ... I saw, after I had read a few of his pieces, that certain thoughts could not be expressed so well in any other way as in dialect." (137)

To return, then, to the trope of *It's Crazy to Stay Chinese in Minnesota*, one might say it's self-defeating to live behind the veil, but that no other options are presented. Eleanor Wong Telemaque's memoir, which I eventually obtained in photocopy form from my col-



league, Joanne Isbey of University of Detroit-Mercy, is summarized thus on its Library of Congress catalog card: "A seventeen-year-old Chinese American and her family tread a balance between the Far East and the Middle West." In brief foreword the author writes: "This is a true story. The names of the white men (the *lo-fan*) [are changed] to protect the innocent. But the names of my father and mother are their own."

Decades before DuBois came to the same conclusion, Corrothers reveals his "most guarded conviction that the race question would never be definitely settled in America; that the whites would *never* extend to us the full commercial and social privileges which other races enjoy here; that all we had suffered and done in this country was merely disciplinary and temporary, and that the Negro's *destiny* was AFRICA." (102)

I close this meditation with another passage from the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here DuBois describes the difficulty of making something of oneself in this world, a hard job for whites but because of the veil even harder for persons of color:

The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all; walls straight and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to the sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above. (2)

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## ELIZA FARNHAM AND THE PRAIRIE

NANCY MCKINNEY

*Life in Prairie Land* is a collection of sketches about Eliza Farnham's frontier experience in Illinois from 1835 to 1840. Published in 1846, her book is a precursor to the local color movement and to American literary realism. Farnham's willingness to describe the unpleasant aspects of her experience leads to a "complexity of perception" which John Hallwas predicts will earn her book due recognition (314). Farnham demonstrates a Romantic sensitivity to the Midwestern landscape as she details not only the influences of land upon the settlers, but also of settlers upon the land. It is that sensitivity to landscape which Hallwas contends is the book's "greatest claim to a position of importance in early Midwestern literature" (309). *Life in Prairie Land* merits critical attention as an example of the kind of literature that bridges gaps between travel literature, local color realism, and romantic iconography.

Although *Life in Prairie Land* consists of a series of sketches, it reads like a novel. As Farnham states in her preface, she intended to write "one or two brief sketches descriptive of Life at the West," but after writing "some hundred and fifty pages," she found herself "far from having said all [she] felt ... [and] willingly resigned [herself] to the current of [her] feelings and wrote on" (xxxiii). The structure of the book unites the sketches; together they form an objective and reliable picture of the West as Farnham observed it.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one begins with Farnham's account of her journey from St. Louis by steamboat up the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, then overland by wagon to her sister's home in Pekin. It continues with sketches of the neighbors; Farnham's marriage, her early housekeeping, and the birth of her son; and a long narrative by Farnham's sister, Mary, about her family's arrival

and life there. Part one ends with Mary's death after a long illness and the death of Farnham's son. Part two includes accounts of Farnham's extensive travels in Illinois, sketches of neighbors and wildlife, and a meditation on the history of the area and possibilities for its future. Part two ends with Farnham's departure to the East.

James Hurt aptly defines *Life in Prairie Land* as travel literature. The book incorporates elements of a travel narrative, but Farnham did not restrict herself to that genre. The book represents an elaboration of the typical "brief, tentative accounts of the prairie travelers' narratives"; she extends her narrative into an "exploration of the meaning of the prairie" (Hurt 24). The prairie appears not as an "incidental setting," but as a "living presence" (24). Hurt notes that "the central action ... is an encounter with the prairie and an attempt to understand it in terms of human life, and to give it a cultural meaning" (24). Hurt characterizes "The First View of the Prairie," a motif which appears in "practically every traveler's account of early Illinois," as "so common that it constitutes almost a topos of western travel writing" (8). He states that "by the 1830s the prairie had been described so often that prairie passages had taken on a rather formulaic quality, following conventions of Romantic picturesque travel writing, adapted to a novel landscape" (8).

The First View of the Prairie typically includes "searching out and studying scenery," sublime thoughts, the mention of flowers,

the almost obligatory comparison to the ocean, with comparisons of groves of trees to islands, and the almost equally common comparison of landscape to cultivated English parks with conventional insistence that the works of nature exceed those of man. (Hurt 8-9)

Farnham's account of her first view of the prairie is typical, yet obviously particular to her own experience. It took place on what Farnham terms "a glorious April day" under emotionally charged circumstances (25). She and her brother were completing the last few miles of their journey and she was excited with thoughts of a reunion with her sister. Not only that, but "one of the great desires of [her] life that yet remained ungratified, was to see a prairie" (26). Anticipation mounts as through "openings among the groves" they catch glimpses of what their driver calls "little meadows ... [and] nothin at all in the way of a prairie" (26). But, soon "the country opened before [them], and swept away to the eastern horizon, a dis-

tance of many miles—a smooth, open plain, undotted by a tree or other familiar object” (26).

Farnham combines sea imagery and the vocabulary of an artist as she recounts her vivid memory of the scene: “I see it now, its soft outline swelling against the clear eastern sky, its heaving surface pencilled with black and brown lines, its borders fringed with the naked trees!” (27). The scene inspired silence:

We had burst into exclamations of delight a dozen times before, when the little glades opened around us, but now there was not a word uttered. Both were lost in contemplation of the sublime spectacle which lay before us. We had no inquiries to make. Nature spoke to us in her own unequivocal language. (27)

Farnham acknowledges that “afterwards [she] saw many [prairies] more magnificent—many richer in all elements of beauty, many so extensive that this appeared a mere meadow beside them, but no other had the charm of this” (26).

Because Farnham’s first encounter with the prairie occurred in early spring before the emergence of lush foliage, her account focuses on the immensity and grandeur of the plain rather than on the variety of plants and flowers. However, on many occasions she describes in detail the vegetation and wildlife of the prairie and its surrounding timbers.

Farnham depicts one particular dawn using the traveler’s formulaic terms to uncommon effect. The effect results from Farnham’s effort to control the angle of vision and to teach the reader how to look. She directs the reader to look over the distant plain, “unbroken save by one ‘lone tree’” (44). From that remote focal point, the reader is invited to follow upward then downward, moving inward, as “light creeps slowly up the sky” as “heavy dews which the cool night has deposited glisten on the leaves and spikes of grass, and the particles, occasionally mingling, are borne by their own weight to the earth” (44-45). The individual blade springs back into “its natural curve” with a motion that imitates the wind, which has not yet begun to stir “the pulseless sea beyond” (45). Again the reader’s view is directed outward to the plain, “a vast ocean, teeming with life [,] redolent of sweet odors!” (45). Then from that sea comes a

steady succession of innumerable [birds’] voices. It comes up near you and travels on, ringing more and more faintly on the ear, till it is returned by another line of respondents, and comes swelling in full

chorus, stronger and nearer, till the last seems to be uttered directly at your feet. (45)

Birds and insects “in the wood behind us” join the voices (45). Finally, the sun emerges, flooding the “grassy main” with “dazzling light”; once again Farnham directs the reader to look outward toward the sparkling prairie sea (45). Farnham’s extended use of sea imagery to render the immensity of the prairie enables her to create waves of sensory images which place the reader at the center of a Romantic encounter with the prairie.

Though *Life in Prairie Land* was written during the heart of American romanticism, it incorporates elements we now attribute to realism and to local color writing, a kind of realism. Nina Baym, writing about the nineteenth century novel, considers it “not unfruitful to think of local color writing as an intermediate form between travel literature and fiction” (116). She explains that the “reportorial interest in local color novels” was considered by reviewers “a distraction” from the plot (116). Reviewers held that the “intense ongoing interest of the ‘novel proper’ was likely to be diluted by accounts of regional life” (116). On the other hand, to those interested in “reportorial material” and “actualities,” a fictional story line would not only “distract,” but also “falsify” (116). Because of that conflict of purpose, the sketch became “the form of choice for ... regional writing”—in a sketch a fictional story line was not an issue (116). We can consider *Life in Prairie Land* an example of the intermediate form between travel literature and fiction.

Clearly Farnham’s book fits the definition of local color writing, even though she wrote much earlier than 1880, when local color became a dominant interest in American literature. Holman states that “local color writing lacked the basic seriousness of true realism [and that] it was content to be entertainingly informative about the surface of special regions” (270-271). On that point Farnham’s book diverges from Holman’s definition. Farnham achieved a more serious purpose beyond the desire to entertain and inform.

Not that the desire to entertain does not inform Farnham’s book. Indeed, humor is an important element in *Life in Prairie Land*, as it is in regional writing and in the early nineteenth century novel. Lucy Freibert and Barbara White state that “by the 1830s American humor had come into its own” (149). They credit “economic and political stability, westward expansion, and a general air of security which

allowed people to breathe more easily and laugh more readily” for a national “confidence that encouraged writers to assume a comic stance” (149). Citing Walter Blair in *Native American Humor*, Freibert and White state that “increased mobility, almanacs, newspapers, dramas, and travel books intensified awareness of national and regional differences and prompted humorous comparisons” (149). Farnham uses humor to express how foreign the prairie residents seem to her. As she describes their speech, dress, and attitudes, she provides comic contrasts with familiar eastern modes; she details the ludicrous and incongruous aspects of western life.

Besides humor, Farnham incorporates dialect and stock characters, two other elements of local color. Farnham explains words and usage as she sketches the characters she meets. For example, when a steamboat hand calls ‘Cappen, please to come *hyur*,’ Farnham’s footnote explains that “it is difficult to convey by any written combination of letters the sound of this word as uttered by the natives . . . It is more like *yur* preceded by *h* sharply aspirated, than anything else to which I can liken it” (5). Hallwas comments that Farnham’s use of dialect “looks forward” to the local color movement of the 1880s (307). He also notes that Farnham’s vividly drawn portraits are “almost types, or stock characterizations of small-town culture” (307). Hallwas cites Farnham’s portraits of “the money-grubbing preacher” and “the talented, dedicated physician” as examples of types which “prefigure the kind of American character types that would be common in local color literature later in the century” (307). Hallwas makes the point that Farnham’s characterizations describe the “actual mix of individuals who inhabited the frontier” and so “can be viewed . . . as a step toward literary realism” (308).

Farnham’s inclusion of many instances which illustrate differences between reality and expectation speaks to her willingness to discuss unpleasant experiences. Realization of those differences creates ambivalence toward the land and region, an attitude which remains characteristic of Midwestern literature. Diane Quantico attributes the “ambivalence often found in Great Plains fiction” to “preconceptions [which] did not fit the world the settlers left behind or the ones they faced” (xvii). More, Annette Kolodny names Farnham as one of the women who “became promotionalists for a New World Eden” (8). Kolodny cites *Life in Prairie Land* as part of the tradition of female writers who create a body of popular fiction about the prairie frontier by describing the frontier and familiarizing it fo

their readers (8-9, 175). Kolodny holds that Farnham and others reacted to their exclusion from the male-based frontier myths by creating their own frontier myths and infused a distinct female presence into the popular culture (5). Farnham may have contributed to the female myth of the West as a New World Eden, but she did not romanticize it. She did not balk at presenting the harsh and unattractive realities of Western life.

In *Life in Prairie Land* Farnham has taken a decisive step towards literary realism. Writing about the contributions of early women writers to the development of the American novel, Freibert and White assert that women were “pioneers” in some areas, “notably realism” (2). They note that frontier romances by Ann Bleecker, Lydia Child, and Catharine Sedgwick “describe the harshness of the wilderness” and “compare favorably” to works by James Fenimore Cooper; they surpass Cooper’s in depicting the suffering of frontier women and the “strength and endurance [women] developed” (3). Bleecker, Child, and Sedgwick “employed lifelike details in the manner of their contemporaries [Sara Josepha] Hale and [Caroline] Kirkland, who were among the earliest American realists” (3). By virtue of her depiction of women’s “strength and endurance” and of her attempts at verisimilitude, Farnham has earned a place among these early American women realists.

Freibert and White state that “the exact descriptions of places and events of everyday life presented in Hale’s *Northwood* (1827) and Kirkland’s *A New Home—Who’ll Follow?* (1839)” indicate “the expansion of realism taking place in the novel generally at the time” (4). They note that while men like Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Royall Tyler, and John DeForest “set works in the public and political sectors,

Hale and Kirkland focused on the individual and the family in the local settings, thereby anticipating the form of realism that arose later in the century in the works of Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (4)

Noting the gradual emergence of the late nineteenth-century realism movement, Freibert and White discuss transitional writers (183). They point to Hale and Kirkland as precursors to “pioneer realists who were active in the 1860s and 1870s” such as John DeForest, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward (183). Hale and Kirkland, among

others, were “consciously striving for realistic effects” (183). Hale’s *Northwood* was “dedicated, in her words, ‘to the delineation of scenes faithful to nature’” (183). Kirkland’s works about the West employ “almost all the techniques ... [now recognized] as characteristic of realism” (183). In addition, the authors note Kirkland’s influence on Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rose Terry Cooke, “later realists who were familiar with her work” (183).

*Life in Prairie Land* can lay claim to being an example of a pioneering work in the tradition of Hale and Kirkland. Farnham’s book predates the realistic period in American literature, but it incorporates elements which we now attribute to realism. Farnham provides her reader with detailed observations and descriptions which compare to the realists’ camera eye perspective. Her use of the realistic convention of fictionalized identities enhances the plausibility of her characters. For example, referring to someone as Miss \_\_\_\_\_ or Mr. F \_\_\_\_\_ makes it seem that an identity exists which the author is attempting to shield. Farnham’s inclusion of unpleasant realities, both of the region and her experience there, contrasts with typical romantic writing and indicates an intent “to go beyond the conventions of romantic travel literature and do justice to the reality that she experienced in Illinois” (Hallwas 310, 11).

Farnham’s complexity of perspective becomes apparent as she relates incidents which reveal ambivalence toward the West. Nature is not only beautiful and beneficial, but also destructive. The West is at once a garden and a wasteland; the West offers freedom and opportunity in the midst of primitive lawlessness. Farnham considers the Native American perspective as she weighs the effect of civilization by white settlers upon the land, animal life, and waterways. She describes the encroachment of civilization upon nature when her meditative solitude is disturbed by the “slow, measured march” of a steamboat (131-132).

Farnham’s complexity of perspective arises from her viewing the Midwest through the eyes of a topographer, historian, woman, writer, and poet; it results in a more serious purpose beyond that of the local colorist’s to entertain and inform. It results in Farnham’s own statement of her philosophy on nature in the tradition of Emerson, Bryant, and Thoreau. Farnham’s response to nature is Transcendental. The comfort she is finally able to find, after the death of her sister and son, is not vaguely religious, but specifically Transcendental in character. Robert C. Bray notes that Farnham’s romanticism “shows distinct



affinities with New England Transcendentalism and deserves serious study in this context” (47). Moreover, Farnham was acquainted with Transcendentalist writers. During the period when Farnham was writing *Life in Prairie Land* she often attended the literary salon of Anne Charlotte Lynch, where she met William Cullen Bryant; it is likely she met writers like Poe, Margaret Fuller, and Richard Henry Stoddard who also visited the salon (Hallwas 299-300).

Unifying Farnham’s narrative is what Robert Bray terms “a sustained and lovely hymn to the land” (16). He characterizes Farnham’s “pursuit of solitude in nature” as “spiritualized” and “romantic,” but he credits her with “perceptively not[ing] the restless, rootless tendencies of the westward movement” (21). Farnham uses her sister’s experience to illustrate both the westward-moving wanderers who did not stay long and the prairie settlers bound to a new home by love for the land who did stay. She presents Mary’s narrative of her family’s journey from the East as a microcosm of the westward movement. The difficult trek into “a new creation” purifies and strengthens the travellers; they are able to buy the ‘claim’ of a ‘squatter’ moving out (Farnham 151-153). Mary’s family represents the wave of new homesteaders arriving continually to take the place of those who move on. At the same time Mary addresses the appeal of the region to those who choose to remain—the beauty in nature, social and physical freedom, and the opportunity to participate in the “mighty Future” of a region so possessed of natural resources (54-55). Mary states, “To bear a part in developing this, seems to me equally calculated to stimulate and gratify our noblest powers” (55).

For Farnham the prairie not only provided the means for development of the human’s noblest powers, but it also created the setting for her own personal development. Hurt has categorized *Life in Prairie Land* as a spiritual autobiography (25). He suggests that “the two parts of the book present a pattern of crisis and recovery in the heart of the natural world” (26). More, Farnham’s experience can be seen as an “active construction of the prairie as a microcosmic field of struggle” through which she discovers the inner resources to “be at home in the world” (27, 29). The division between parts one and two signals Farnham’s inner change. In part two, tone is noticeably different; Farnham becomes warmer and less satirical. She seems kinder in her characterizations and her snobbishness disappears. Additionally, Farnham becomes more reflective on the subject of man and nature. Throughout the book Farnham states general prin-

ciples, then, using herself or her Western acquaintances as examples, shows the results of those principles in action. *Life in Prairie Land* stands not only as a record of Western life, but also as a record of Eliza Farnham's spiritual journey.

*Life in Prairie Land* merits critical attention as an example of the kind of literature that bridges gaps between travel literature, local color realism, and romantic iconography. Farnham reconciles two competing impulses—the romantic, represented by her use of nature and poetry, and the realistic, represented by her attention to history, geography, and topography. Farnham's journey is both literal and spiritual. The interest in *Life in Prairie Land* lies in Farnham's fusing of genres. It is a "curious book," Hurt comments (33). Part of the curiosity stems from a flexibility of genre which allows it to fit into several overlapping categories. Farnham's book is a collection of sketches which reads like a novel; it is at once expository essay, historical chronicle, cultural history, Romantic narrative poem, local color realism, and spiritual autobiography. To again cite Hurt, *Life in Prairie Land* is

a Romantic travel narrative looking outward at the world and an inward-looking exploration of spiritual crisis and recovery. The two strains produce a strangely touching account of the Illinois landscape charged with emotional meaning. (33)

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## A NAME ON THE LAND

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Actually, the name is on the land in many places between the Appalachians and the trans-Mississippi Midwest, in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri, most frequently as a county, but almost as often as a country town, a crossroads, as well as the name of the Ohio hamlet where the one who carried the name into the Midwest and attached it firmly to the land in many Midwestern places met his fate.

Perhaps the name originated at an obscure English or Scottish stream crossing, even as Oxenford became Oxford and a center of commerce as well as learning in the twelfth century. Like Oxford, the name has two syllables; it is a name that emerged briefly from obscurity into notoriety and ultimately to return to its current obscurity even as it endures on the land in so many places. It emerged from obscurity to find its places on the land as a result of one of the countless skirmishes in the many campaigns against the Ohio Indians and their British and colonial allies that marked the American Revolution in the West—west of the Appalachians, that is, in what is now the Midwest, a war seen by the Indians not as a war for independence but a war of colonial aggression, against which the British and occasional colonials were allies on the side of justice and freedom.

The name that made its indelible mark on the land in those critical decades in North America in the late eighteenth century is that of William Crawford, farmer, surveyor, Revolutionary soldier, friend of George Washington, and victim of the war with the Ohio Indians.

Born in Virginia in 1732 of Scotch-Irish parents who migrated to Pennsylvania and then to Virginia, Crawford alternately farmed and surveyed, and, like his friend George Washington, fought in the colo-

nial wars that culminated in the American Revolution. At the start of the Revolution, he immediately became active, first as a member of the committee of defense at Pittsburg; then he aided in raising Virginia regiments. Commissioned Lieutenant-Colonel of the 5th Virginia Regiment on February 13, 1786, he was promoted to Colonel of the 7th Virginia, which he led in the battles on Long Island, the retreat from New York, and the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown. In November 1777, Congress sent him to Pittsburg, where he commanded militia in the defense of the West against the Indians. He erected Fort Crawford on the Allegheny, Fort Laurens, the first fort in what would become Ohio, and Fort Fincastle, at what is now Wheeling, West Virginia. In 1780 he visited Congress to request support for frontier protection and for an expedition against the British and Indians at Sandusky and Detroit. Neither was forthcoming, and in late 1781, after Yorktown had been fought and won, Crawford requested retirement. Early in 1782, in good health at fifty, Crawford settled at his home on the Youghioghny River. He hoped for a peaceful retirement in his cabin by the river, surrounded by children and grandchildren in a country newly free.

But the end of the war in the East did not mean either a secure frontier for the settlers or free open land across the Ohio for those who would go on to the West. Nor did the British and their influence leave the Ohio Country, but they continued to support their Indian allies, as did the notorious Girty brothers, George, James, and Simon, Jr., frontiersmen, Indian partisans, and, to many American frontiersmen, traitorous renegades.

But Crawford's retirement did not bring peace in his life, nor did peace come to the frontier on either side of the Ohio. Border depredations continued, and the establishment by Moravian missionaries of colonies of Christian Indians on the Muskingum River, chiefly Gnadenhutzen, but also Schaenbrunn and Salem, provided a focal point for the settlers' fears and hostility. Two companies of what passed for militia on the frontier, led by Lieutenant-Colonel David Williamson, a veteran of Lord Dunmore's War and the Revolutionary War in the West, raided the Moravian settlements late in 1781 and captured a few hostages, who were taken to Fort Pitt, threatened, and released. Faced with a good deal of criticism for his relatively mild treatment of the Indians, Williamson led another raid in March, 1782. The 80 or so members of the raid, described by Theodore Roosevelt in *The Winning of the West* as "the brutal, the vicious and the ruffi-

anly,” and a few honest men, raided Gnadenhutten, captured 96 prisoners, and in fine democratic fashion, voted what to do with them. The majority, with 18 in the minority, voted that they be executed. While the minority proclaimed that they called upon “God to witness that they were innocent of the crime to be committed,” the majority began its bloody work. While the Indians prayed, all 35 men, 27 women, and 34 children were tomahawked, scalped, and burned as the village was destroyed.

The event was not one of the moments in the settlement of the Ohio frontier of which we can be proud, and it put the Ohio Indians, chiefly Wyandots, Delawares, and Shawnees, not to mention the British still ensconced in Detroit, on notice that the struggle for the West would continue—Indians seeing it as a war against American aggression, the frontiersman as a crusade against savagery—as well as for cheap land—, and the British, kindly supportive of the Indians, as a geopolitical issue, although they didn’t know the term.

Continuing tension and occasional firefights led Brigadier General William Irvine, commander of Fort Pitt to call up Pennsylvania and Virginia militia to march against the Ohio Indians at Sandusky—now Upper Sandusky—, defeat them, and bring peace to the frontier. About 400 men, some of them veterans of the Gnadenhutten atrocity, assembled at Mingo Bottom, near present Steubenville, and voted Colonel William Crawford their commander. Reluctantly, after General Irvine requested that he take command, Crawford made his will, divided his extensive land holdings among his wife, his son, his son-in-law, and his male grandchildren, provided for his four slaves, and joined his command at Mingo Bottom.

The attacking force, including Williamson as second in command, Lieutenant John Rose of the Regular Army, Dr. John Knight, surgeon, as well as Crawford’s son-in-law Major William Harrison, his son John Crawford, and his nephew, William Crawford, moved promptly out of Mingo Bottom on May 25, 1782, for a campaign that would last 20 days and result in one of the more inept performances in American military history even as it gave to Ohio, Midwestern, and American myth the hero whose name remains on the land. The force, 480 strong, advanced through what are now Jefferson, Harrison, Tuscarawas, Holmes, Ashland, and Crawford counties and into Wyandot. They met the Sandusky River in eastern Crawford County and followed it to Old Town—now near Upper Sandusky—and on to the north. Throughout the march, Indians, obviously scouts, were