



Middlebrow Moderns

Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s

Edited by LISA BOTSHON & MEREDITH GOLDSMITH

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*“Written with a Hard and Ruthless Purpose”:
Rose Wilder Lane, Edna Ferber, and
Middlebrow Regional Fiction*

DONNA CAMPBELL

When Walter Benn Michaels proposed in *Our America* that “the great American modernist texts of the ’20s must be understood as deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing the American” (13), his examination left out popular middlebrow novels such as those by Edna Ferber and Rose Wilder Lane, two writers whose novels both complicate and challenge Michaels’s assertions. Close contemporaries Lane (1886–1968) and Ferber (1885–1968) carved out careers in journalism and as professional writers of popular fiction before settling on regional fiction. Starting out as a reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal*, Ferber published her first novel, *Dawn O’Hara*, in 1911, and in the following decade she became famous for several story collections—*Roast Beef, Medium* (1913), *Personality Plus* (1914), and *Emma McChesney and Company* (1915)—that examined issues of labor, urban life, and the “New Woman” through the practical eyes of their heroine, middle-aged clothing saleswoman Emma McChesney. Best known today for her collaborative role in writing the “Little House” series of children’s books with her mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane was far more celebrated than her mother in the 1910s and 1920s, when she worked as a feature writer for the *San Francisco Bulletin* and published serial fiction, travel sketches, and biographies in *Sunset* and other magazines. When Ferber and Lane turned

from journalism and short stories to novels in the 1920s, both received not only popular but critical acclaim for their work. Ferber's *So Big* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1925, and a *New York Times* editorial proposed a Pulitzer nomination for Lane's *Free Land* in 1938. In addition, Lane's short fiction had been included in *The Best Short Stories of 1927*, and her "Innocence" was an O. Henry Award-winning story in 1922 (Holtz 280).

Despite their popularity and relative critical acclaim in the 1920s, Ferber and Lane were stigmatized in later decades as writers whose popular fiction catered to sentimental tastes. Their regional novels share the trajectory of the pioneer chronicle: the family or individual moves to a new land and attempts to tame it or the surrounding community, with mixed results. In her novels, Lane adopted a persona of the quintessential insider, one whose pioneer roots reached back to the 1630s and included successive waves of western migration, the most recent of which had led to her birth in a Dakota claim shanty in 1886. It was a constructed identity that ignored her world travel, her restlessness, and her belief that farming promised little more than being "a slave" to livestock. No less a pioneer through her background as a member of one of the few Jewish families in Appleton, Wisconsin, Ferber constructed for herself a position that held in tension an insider's knowledge and an outsider's perspective. Proud of her research and the native knowledge that assured the authenticity of her scenes, Ferber admitted that scenes such as one set in the Chicago produce market were "written purely out of my imagination" (*A Peculiar Treasure* 277). She carefully wrote outsiders as observers into most of her novels, all the while positing a deep complicity and sense of identification between herself and America, which she saw as "the Jew among the nations. It is resourceful, adaptable, maligned, envied, feared, imposed upon" (*A Peculiar Treasure* 10).

From these artificially constructed yet apparently deeply authentic and compelling personae of insider and outsider, both writers inscribed political truths in a nostalgic regionalist context by interrogating the conventions of the genre in which they wrote. First among these is the figure of the "Prairie Madonna," a popular icon of the times pressed into service as an agent of American identity formation. In addition to taking a more realistic look at this figure, Ferber and Lane critique even as they capitalize on the nostalgic pioneer ideology so prevalent in the twenties—Lane by demonstrating the patent falsehood of the myths of free land and endurance on the Great Plains in *Free Land* and Ferber through her misunderstood satiric portrait of "the sunbonnets" and domestic culture in *Cimarron*. Second, they explore 1920s nativism and racism, which Ferber

confronts through the theme of miscegenation recast as exogamy or intermarriage, a vision that suggests tolerance rather than nativist sentiment and that challenges Michaels's theories. A third convention that Ferber and Lane discredit is the national myth about the acquisition of land and wealth. Finally, the American penchant for collecting objects of material and social culture is revealed for what it is—a project that supports a unifying narrative of American history but does so through cultural theft and misunderstanding. In these ways, these novelists' representative works, including Ferber's *Cimarron* (1930) and Lane's *Free Land* (1938), reflect on conventional reconstructions of the past through central issues of the twenties and thirties: the complicated legacy of the pioneer myth, the controversy over racism and nativism, the national myth of limitless lands, and the exploitation of objects from other cultures.

First, Ferber and Lane challenged ideas of the conventional Western heroine. Recast as what Sandra L. Myres and others have called the Prairie Madonna, the "sturdy helpmate and civilizer of the frontier" (Myres 2), this figure, often pictured holding a child and framed by the circular opening of the covered wagon, graced such portraits as W. D. H. Koerner's 1921 painting *Madonna of the Prairie*. Writing of these images, Annette Stott has traced a progression from the more passive "True Womanhood" icon of the Prairie Madonna to her more active counterpart of the 1890s and later, the New Woman-inspired "Pioneer Woman." The Pioneer Woman's sunbonnet bespeaks gentility and civilization even as her active poses, frequently holding a gun in one hand and a child in the other, attest to her active participation in the project of westward expansion. According to Stott, representation of these women increased during the 1920s, a period in which cultural awareness of and nostalgia for a usable pioneer past also increased. In writing of this period, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay further contends that women's Western novels and narratives "seem to fall into two categories: those that continue to dramatize the story of an eastern woman, most often a young bride, going west, and those that describe growing up female in the Old West. . . . Many of these texts locate themselves in reference to the popular literature of the 'wild' West, drawing on its romantic and nostalgic elements at the same time that they aim to revise stereotypes" (286–87).

In two of her pioneer novels of the 1930s, *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933) and *Free Land* (1938), Rose Wilder Lane employs and critiques these figures of the Western heroine as she explores the mythology of homesteading and land settlement that they exemplify. Drawn from tales told by her mother, *Let the Hurricane Roar* is the conventionally celebratory pioneer

tale of Charles and Caroline Ingalls. In it, Lane addresses the paradox that both she and her mother avoid confronting in the "Little House" series: that "free land" is an illusion and that the only way to acquire land is to leave it to seek work and money elsewhere. A more complex revision of this essential plot appears in *Free Land*, Lane's last novel before she abandoned writing fiction for books articulating her libertarian philosophy. Based on the experiences of her parents and of her Ingalls grandparents, this novel was Lane's protest against the devaluation of an American tradition of independence that she felt was being undercut by the New Deal. It is a prototypical piece of Great Plains fiction as Diane Quantic defines the genre in *The Nature of the Place*: "the person who attempts to impose his or her will upon the land is overcome by natural disaster, a blizzard, a prairie fire, or a dust storm, and the person who understands the land's potential reaps bountiful harvests" (4). As in *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933), in *Free Land* Lane transforms the experiences of her father's life—a life that he said had been "mostly disappointments"—into the familiar pioneer surface narrative of persistence and triumph.¹ The protagonist, David Beaton, marries his childhood sweetheart, Mary, and, full of optimism, moves with her out West to take up a claim. Blizzards, droughts, grasshoppers, heat, thunderstorms, horse-thieves, and other natural and man-made disasters plague them, yet at the end of the novel he decides to stay on his land, an ending congruent with the Great Plains myth.

Beneath this surface, however, lies Lane's bleaker, more pessimistic version of the pioneer myth and the Ingalls family story than that shown in the "Little House" books. Written near the time of Wilder's *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939) and *The Long Winter* (1940), *Free Land* incorporates situations from both works, but it tells the darker stories that Wilder felt were unsuitable for the children's series. Dipping from generalized myth into history, Lane exposes the frontier as the site not of limitless opportunity but of inescapable violence over contested territories. The Beatons meet a claim jumper who has killed a man, and they rescue a woman who is nearly dead after giving birth on the trail; after she recovers, she tells them that her husband has been killed and their sheep clubbed to death by cattlemen. Another episode tells of the settlers' lynching of the Bordens, fictional counterparts to the real-life Benders of Kansas, who murdered travelers for their possessions and buried children alive in their always-plowed and never-planted garden plot.² The disputes over land gain special resonance in the subplot involving the Peters family, Lane's thinly disguised fictional counterpart for the Ingalls family in Wilder's work. Like the Ingallses, the fictional Peters family has been forced to leave their farm

in Indian Territory, a farm that they settled because they had word from Washington that it would be opened for white settlers. They share with the Ingallses a similar family composition and life history, dialogue and set phrases ("there's plenty more down cellar in a teacup," for example), and a desperate honesty conflicting with the struggle to escape an equally desperate poverty. However, the turned dresses, short rations, and optimistic "making-do" spirit of the "Little House" books become here a narrative of outgrown and worn-out clothes, starvation rations, and a family stretched to the breaking point, as exemplified in a tense near-confrontation when David and Mr. Peters, the Pa Ingalls character, both want to steal lumber from an abandoned claim shanty.

In addition to using the traditional man-against-nature themes of the pioneer novel, Lane contrasts the Peters and Beaton families to demonstrate the hardships of prairie life. *Free Land* pits the figure of the Prairie Madonna represented by Mary, David's conventional and literal-minded wife, against the New Western "Pioneer Woman" heroine represented by the half-wild Peters daughter, Nettie. First seen carrying a rifle, Nettie represents the prototype well, with her keen blue eyes, tanned skin, braids "like an Indian woman's," and ambition to work as a teacher so that she can help support her family. Realizing his wife Mary's limitations, David feels drawn to Nettie but realizes that he can do nothing: "It's different, with you. Nettie, I—It's—You're so—' I know,' she said again. . . . 'It's one of the things that don't happen'" (*Free Land* 156). The Peters family also serves as a point of economic contrast to the Beatons, who are initially better off but sink fast in the inhospitable prairie environment. The more obvious signs of the Beatons' increasing poverty, such as limited food and patched clothing, affect David less than more subtle markers of a loss of status, such as the humiliation of having a sod-thatched roof, burning cow chips for fuel, and driving oxen instead of horses: "Even then, and back in York State, only the French drove oxen" (180). In the end, the Beatons can only survive when David's father offers to give the struggling family \$2,000 as a gift against David's eventual inheritance. Having demolished popular conceptions of free land, of happy marriage with a woman who is a soul mate as well as housemate, and of self-sufficiency, Lane paints a picture so realistic that David's decision to stay on the farm brought protests from readers and reviewers, one of whom criticized the "false ending" as "the only false note" in the story (Holtz 280).

On the surface, Ferber's novel *Cimarron* also fits the pattern of the pioneer myth of the "eastern woman or young bride going west" that Georgi-Findlay describes; yet its compliance with the outward form of the Western

heroine's narrative masks the satire that underlies the novel. Sabra Cravat, the heroine, is a conventionally domestic woman who reluctantly accompanies her romantic scapegrace of a husband, Yancey Cravat, to the Oklahoma Territory in 1889.³ The novel parallels Sabra's growth from helpless tenderfoot to newspaper editor, clubwoman, and congresswoman with Oklahoma's growth from a wild frontier settlement to an oil-rich and prosperous state. Its central conflict lies in the efforts of what Ferber calls "the redoubtable sunbonnets" (*Cimarron* 248) to make "this new frontier town like the old as speedily as possible," even as Yancey, despite bringing law to the community, "tried to make the new as unlike the old as possible" (*Cimarron* 166). The book's action pivots on this central conflict, Sabra's relentless efforts to "civilize" and impose structure on the disorderly town of Osage, and Yancey's defense of the outcasts, among them the retired madam Dixie Lee and the Osage Indians displaced from the town that bears their name. Sabra defeats Yancey in this battle between civilization and frontier, for, late in the work, the narrative voice announces that "the sunbonnets had triumphed" (376).

Reading *Cimarron* as a conventional celebration of Oklahoma and the pioneering spirit, Ferber's reviewers and fans ignored Ferber's ironic tone and the grim humor with which she saw the triumph of the sunbonnets. Celebrating the region had certainly not been part of her plan. Writing to Mary Austin on 17 November 1931, Ferber protested, "I really know absolutely nothing of the Southwest, and have never traveled in it except to go to Oklahoma, briefly. And Oklahoma I hate and loathe, stern and stem, people and habits, towns and country, up and down, forever and ever" (Letter to Mary Austin). As Ferber pointed out in her first autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure*, "*Cimarron* had been written with a hard and ruthless purpose. It was, and is, a malevolent picture of what is known as American womanhood and American sentimentality. It contains paragraphs and even chapters of satire, and, I am afraid, bitterness, but I doubt that more than a dozen people ever knew this" (339). Readers instead responded with expectations shaped by the conventions of the pioneer narrative: a civilized woman reluctantly comes to a Western land, remaining to tame it into a domestic territory suitable for statehood. This narrative, a staple in popular works from Bess Streeter Aldrich's *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928) through Gertrude Finney's *The Plums Hang High* (1955), predisposed audiences to read Sabra's story in the same vein. Admiring Sabra Cravat's strength and understanding it as standard-issue pioneer woman grit, Ferber's audience missed the satire. They failed to recognize that Sabra is also indifferent to art and literature, narrow-minded, racist, and utterly conventional.

In addition to sentimentality, Ferber attacked consumerism and the commercial spirit in the novel, but most readers missed this as well. As Ferber pointed out some years later, "In *Cimarron* I wrote a story whose purpose was to show the triumph of materialism over the spirit in America, and I did show it, but perhaps I was too reticent about it. . . . In *So Big* I used the same theme. . . . Same result. Terrific sales; about nine people knew what I was driving at" (Gilbert 312). Ann Romines points out in *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* that learning literacy and consumerism together was part of the acculturation process for many pioneer women. The lessons Sabra learns, however, are inadequate to the task of creating true literacy or culture. Nor is Ferber's satire especially subtle when evaluating Sabra's accomplishments. The "triumph of the sunbonnets" really means that the town of Osage learns to create art by transforming humble kitchen appliances from useful and plain to useless and hideous based on the household hints columns Sabra publishes in the local newspaper: "Women all over the country were covering wire bread toasters with red plush, embroidering sulphurous yellow chenille roses on this, tying the whole with satin ribbons and hanging it on the wall to represent a paper rack. . . . They painted the backsides of frying pans with gold leaf and daisies" (167). Worst of all from the perspective of the food-loving Ferber, the sunbonnets had transformed plain cooking into "sophisticated cookery." As Laura Shapiro notes in *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, "The characteristic sweetness of much American cooking was also established during these years" (Shapiro 193) of the early twentieth century, and the forward-looking Sabra's creation of a pineapple and marshmallow salad, a variation on Fannie Farmer's Los Angeles Fruit Salad (Shapiro 194), provokes her hired girl and future daughter-in-law Ruby Big Elk to derision and Yancey to laughter, despair—"Pineapple and marshmallow salad! 'It is all over with the Republic'" (306)—and a permanent exodus from home. Reading *Cimarron* in the context of the era's "scientific" cookery and women's magazines that published household hints and printed recipes for exactly these kinds of fashionably indigestible dishes, readers failed to see Sabra's household improvement campaigns as parodies.

As a parting shot, Ferber concludes the novel with a scene whose significance should not have escaped the book's original readers. Ten Oklahoma millionaires commission a statue of the Spirit of the Oklahoma Pioneer, a monument for which everyone assumes that Sabra Cravat will be the model. Throughout the novel, however, Yancey has staunchly defended the territory's outcasts, the prostitute Dixie Lee and the Osage,

fighting for Indian citizenship and property rights during the debates over statehood: "You white men sold them the piece of arid and barren land on which they now live in squalor and misery. . . . Deprived of their tribal laws . . . herded together in stockades like wild animals, robbed, cheated, kicked, hounded from place to place, give them the protection of the country that has taken their country away from them" (279). When Krbecek, the sculptor, hears these tales from Sabra, he instead creates "an heroic figure of Yancey Cravat . . . [and] touching his shoulder for support, the weary, blanketed figure of an Indian" (381), a statue that despite its paternalism focuses the public gaze on the contested issue of land appropriation rather than simply reinforcing the mythic power of the pioneer woman. To Oklahoma readers and reviewers in 1930, the satiric reference should have been abundantly clear, for in the late 1920s large public statues such as August Leimbach's *Madonna of the Trail* and John Gregory's *Pioneer Woman* (1927) proliferated. Indeed, shortly before Ferber made her first trip to Oklahoma in 1928, businessman Ernest W. Marland had commissioned twelve *Pioneer Woman* statues by different artists. He exhibited the winning design around the United States before it was "cast in a 19-foot monument for Ponca City, Oklahoma" (Stott 316). In parodying the sculpture competition and rewriting its ending, Ferber sets the record straight about the true pioneer hero—Yancey, the defender of Indian rights—and satirizes the twenties nostalgia that venerates the Prairie Madonna without recognizing, let alone disagreeing with, her rigidly conventional and intolerant attitudes.

Ferber also addresses a second defining concept of twenties thought: nativism, which critic John Higham has defined as an "intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. 'un-American') connections" (Higham, quoted in Michaels, *Our America*, 2). According to Marjorie Perloff, for Michaels, nativism is a "commitment to the notion that one's identity is defined by racial difference" (Perloff 99) and that this difference makes "the fear of miscegenation and of the reproductive family . . . become powerful" enough to lead to "the homosexual family and the incestuous family" as mechanisms to prevent mixed-race children (99). In readings of some texts not conventionally modernist in subject and style, Michaels works out his theoretical and historical theses; the latter "describes the emergence of a distinctly modern concept of cultural identity" ("American Modernism and the Poetics of Identity" 121), and the former contends that "questions of race and identity are questions of form and representation" (125) rather than simply of history, an extension of the modernist project of making the work coextensive or identical with the

thing. In responding to critics Charles Altieri, Marjorie Perloff, and Robert Von Hallberg, Michaels insists on one point in particular that bears closely on the issues that Lane and Ferber discuss: that "no event in the nativist canon was more frequent than sex with an Indian" (Michaels, "Response," 124), an act attempted so that children could be "as native as their native American parent" even if this connection exists only by association. Ferber confronts the nativism of the 1920s in several regional novels through the theme of miscegenation recast as exogamy or intermarriage. Her heroes, such as Clint Maroon of *Saratoga Trunk* (1941), Pervus DeJong of *So Big* (1924), Jordan Benedict of *Giant* (1952), and even the briefly glimpsed Steve Baker of *Showboat* (1926), who declares himself to be of mixed blood to protect his wife against charges of miscegenation, are blond giants with immense physical strength. Often gamblers and cowboys, they choose women who are not only strong but also strongly racialized: through their looks, like Sabra Cravat of *Cimarron* and Leslie Benedict of *Giant*; through the technique of "doubling" the heroine with another character, as Magnolia Ravenal is linked to Julie Dozier, a late but classic example of the "tragic mulatto" heroine, in *Showboat*; and through their heritage of color, like Clio Dulaine of *Saratoga Trunk*.

In *Cimarron*, despite stereotypical representations of Native- and African-American characters, Ferber employs a broad variety of techniques to critique racial sentiment. Sabra's racially ambiguous black-winged eyebrows and creamy complexion are characteristic of Ferber's heroines, as is the insistence on "old stock" American bloodlines. In *Cimarron* and elsewhere, Ferber satirizes such claims through the names themselves—Sabra⁴ is a Venable (suggesting "venerable"), of Wichita—and the ridiculous context in which such snobbery is introduced, as when one of Sabra's neighbors in "that welter of mud, Indians, pine shacks, drought, and semi-barbarism known as Osage, Indian Territory," declares another to be a lady because "Mrs. Nisbett . . . was a Krumpf, of Ouachita, Arkansas."⁵ Early in the book when discussing the remorseless Anglo-American outlaw called simply "The Kid," Yancey comments, "Funny thing, I never yet knew a bad man who wasn't light complected, or anyway, blue or gray eyes" (479), a romantic convention of dime novels that takes on racial significance here. Surprisingly for their time, Ferber's novels frequently introduce intermarriage between different ethnic or racial groups (the Steve Baker-Julie Dozier subplot in *Showboat*, Clio Dulaine and Clint Maroon of *Saratoga Trunk*, Jordy and Juana Benedict in *Giant*, among others).

In *Cimarron* intermarriage between whites and other groups is recast as sound eugenics; an infusion of fresh blood to strengthen the pioneer stock.

Michaels suggests that the reason for positing the Indian as ideal citizen is that he is not simply American but a Vanishing American: "It is because the Indian's sun was perceived as setting that he could become . . . a kind of paradigm for increasingly powerful American notions of ethnic identity and eventually for the idea of an ethnicity that could be threatened or defended, repudiated or reclaimed" (38). Indeed, it is the vanishing Osage themselves rather than Yancey who preserve a color barrier (which the novel mentions twice), a racist practice that ironically renders them "pure Americans" and fit partners for white pioneers seeking to legitimate their claim to be Americans as well as for those seeking simply exploitation of the Osage's oil wealth. One example is the story of Sabra's hired girl Arita Red Feather, and her lover, the Cravats' African-American servant, Isaiah. Blinded by her own racism into thinking of Isaiah as a child although he has grown to manhood, Sabra is surprised when Arita bears Isaiah's baby. Although the doctor tells Sabra that the Osage have "kept the tribe pure" except for intermarriage with whites and that discussing the baby could prove dangerous to Arita, Sabra pays little attention since she dichotomizes the issue of color into white/not white, a particularly deadly sort of racism. A few days later, Arita, Isaiah, and the baby turn up missing and meet a terrible fate: Arita and the child are sewn into a bag of uncured rawhide and left to die in the sun, while Isaiah is tied down within striking distance of a rattlesnake.

The other example of cross-racial "hybridity" is the relationship between Yancey and Sabra's son Cim and Ruby Big Elk, an Osage. Their relationship goes beyond Michaels's "sex with an Indian" paradigm to include cross-cultural exchanges such as Cim's participation in the tribe's peyote ceremonies and Yancey's admission that he, too, has taken peyote many times. After the marriage of Cim and Ruby, something largely proscribed or avoided in the nativist/modernist texts Michaels cites, Sabra responds to Yancey's prodding and reluctantly helps herself to the food at the wedding feast, here as in other narratives an act signifying acceptance or the symbolic ingestion of another culture. "This meat—this stuffing—is it chopped or ground through a grinder?" Sabra asks. "'Naw,' [the Osage woman] answered politely. 'Chawed'" (359). Sabra faints, but her acceptance of another culture, however begrudging, sets the stage for her acceptance of her half-Osage grandchildren. As Yancey tells Sabra, from Ruby's strength and Cim's "good stock" will come "such stuff as Americans are made of" (356–57). Whereas the other outsider, Sol Levy, the Jewish peddler, is excluded from the town's emotional life despite the Christlike attributes that show him as simultaneously persecuted and exalted, the

offspring of the Native Americans and the flourishing pioneers populate the town, and Cim Cravat's matter-of-fact adoption of Osage ways demonstrates that cultural reciprocity and pride in identity, not assimilation, is the fulfillment of Yancey's dream.

In *Saratoga Trunk*, the racial ambiguity is deliberate as Clio Dulaine manipulates New Orleans's obsession with racial bloodlines to her own advantage. A product of the *plaçage* system of alliances between wealthy New Orleans white men and their light-skinned African-American mistresses—alliances in which "the formality of marriage" (*Saratoga Trunk* 23) played no role—Clio acknowledges both sides of her heritage, the "royal blood of France" of Nicolas Dulaine (26) and the blood of her grandmother Vaudreuil, a "free woman of color." Her actions throughout the novel are performances designed to provoke questions about her identity and to mock the social pretensions she encounters. She shocks the multitudes and thereby leads rather than follows the fashion, whether staring rudely at her half-sister, the legitimate daughter of Nicolas Dulaine, when she goes to the opera in New Orleans, or walking instead of riding to the springs when she arrives in Saratoga. Ignoring the coded systems of racial mixing and segregation followed by generations of her female forebears, she capitalizes on the American infatuation with aristocracy by inventing an entirely new identity. While visiting Saratoga, she pretends to be the widowed Comtesse de Trenaunay de Chanfret and adds an air of authenticity to her disguise by refusing to use her title, telling the hotelier, "I wish to be known only as plain Mrs. De Chanfret" (146). Ferber heightens the sense of artifice through Clio's use of masks. She literally paints herself white to face the world: Her "naturally creamy skin was dead white with the French liquid powder she used. . . . Almost a clown's mask, except for its beauty" (71). Significantly, although many suspect that she is not what she seems, only her lover Clint Maroon, from whom she has no secrets, comments on the unnatural white powder on her face. Her performance in whiteface passes because the transient, ambitious, and insecure denizens of Saratoga are at first too worried about their own social facades to look closely at hers.

Before the masquerade ball that closes the Saratoga season, Clio makes plans to attend as "a French marquise in a powdered wig," the quintessential representation of her false persona. Her costume outrages the gossips and causes them to speculate about her background. One detractor murmurs, "I always thought Creoles were colored people," to which another responds, "New Orleans aristocracy—French and Spanish blood" (31). Knowing their suspicions, she instead adopts a mask caricaturing the

other part of her heritage. She paints her face dark brown instead of dead white, transforming herself into a black praline woman, and tosses sweets to the shocked matrons in the concert hall. Like Magnolia Ravenal, she sings powerfully in what Ferber describes as a flawless imitation of black dialect: "She was imitating every wandering New Orleans minstrel and cavorting street band she had ever seen, every caroling berry vendor from the bayous; . . . she was defiance (*sic*) against every convention she so hated" (340). Clio's unplanned and uncontrolled minstrelsy disrupts and mocks the social and cultural aspirations of her Saratoga audience, exposing their pretensions in several ways. By appearing as a caricature of what her audience believes her to be, she uncovers their unspeakable speculations on race and class and drags these ideas into public rather than private discourse. Moreover, rather than simply enjoying what Eric Lott has termed the "spectacle of vulgarity" that was an important feature in early minstrel shows (Lott 138), her audience is alarmed by the vulgarity of a minstrel performance that it does not control. Clio's singing further undermines their high-culture pretensions by spoiling their pleasure in the mundane operatic concert that follows her masquerade. After her blackface turn as the praline woman, Clio dons her whiteface mask once again, returning to the ball dressed as a marquise with white powdered hair and white powdered face as she commands attention and fits easily into the society that she despises. With her power intact, she breaks with convention for good by spurning the wealthy and timid railroad magnate Bart van Steed in favor of Clint Maroon, an adventurer like herself. What she has accomplished through her minstrel's antics, however, is to underscore the volatile nature of performances of race and social class, performances in which all are complicit through the quest for status that brings them to Saratoga.

Through her later heroine, Leslie Lynnton Benedict of *Giant*, which is set in the 1920s, Ferber makes a more direct effort to critique racial performance. Like Sabra, with her dark hair, sallow skin, and dark eyes, the Ohio-born "aristocratic Virginian" Leslie Lynnton is as unconventional in her beauty as in her intellectual pursuits. After a few days' courtship, she marries tall, blond Jordan "Bick" Benedict, the owner of Reata, the largest ranch in Texas, and travels with him to her new home. In a few short years she has borne two children, Jordan, a brunette like herself, and Luz, who is blond like Bick; and gained two admirers: the surly, drunken Jett Rink, whose oil wealth allows him to give free rein to his cruelty and racism; and the seventy-year-old Baldwin "Uncle Bawley" Benedict, who shares with Leslie an appreciation of music and a sympathy for the individual. For the

next twenty-five years, Leslie protests in vain against the injustices she sees: the theft of Texas land through early deed swindles and the establishment of the Texas Republic ("And which was aggressor and which defender?" she asks herself when visiting the Alamo [291]); the ranch owners' treatment of migrant workers, their neglect of the workers' deplorable living conditions, and their toleration of parasites like Señor Gomez who profit from the workers' misery; the harsh punishment meted out to illegal aliens; and the appalling lack of health care and basic services in the towns on the ranch.

In many ways, *Giant* is a reworking of *Cimarron* with a more sympathetic heroine and a sharper critique of racism. A pampered Southern belle like Sabra Cravat, Leslie Lynnton marries a powerful man whose ideals she never fully shares and moves to a raw, dusty country where the amenities of civilization and culture are few. Her life includes seeing and eating unfamiliar food that makes her faint and an initial resistance to the land that is now her home. After having a child, she travels to her old home and finds it lacking, a point of decision that both heroines resolve by returning to the harsh new land they left behind. Like Sabra, Leslie sets out to change her environment into something resembling the civilization she left behind, but, more aesthetically gifted than Sabra, Leslie eschews gaudy imitations of Eastern objets d'art and works to integrate the natural colors of the landscape into her home at the ranch, the small stone-and-adobe Main House. Her aim is synthesis of the new and the old, not a duplication of Virginia on the plains of Texas. Her children, like Sabra's, grow up and unsettle her by marrying across racial lines, for despite her more liberal views, Leslie is stunned when her son Jordy marries Juana, the Mexican-American granddaughter of her husband's ranch foreman. Leslie becomes an important figure not because of her matriarchal status but because of her role in shaping the culture of the place, but whereas Sabra leads the way in forcing old cultures over new, Leslie works ceaselessly to remake Texas into an empire more socially just than the oppressively class- and race-bound country to which she came as a bride.

Throughout *Giant*, Ferber insists on the parallels between Reata and Texas as imperial powers set in the middle of a democratic United States, autonomous "countries" with a ruling oligarchy and a caste system based on race and exclusion. Leslie first notices this power structure when she observes gender relations in her new homeland: "[she] began to speculate about the high shrill feminine voices, about the tentativeness, about the vague air of insecurity that touched these women" (168), describing them to her father as "unsure and sort of deferential. Like oriental women" (54).

She also notes that "when the men replied, speaking to the women . . . they changed their tone[;] it was as adults change when they speak to little children, coming down to their mental level" (173). Later, when the men close her out of their discussion with smiles and flattery, she attacks them: "You date back a hundred thousand years. Politics! What's so dirty about your politics that I can't hear it!" (308). Much of the dirty politics involves illegally controlling Mexican Americans, including the corrupt practices of intimidating the ranch hands so that they "vote right . . . like they're told to vote" (310). In the first few chapters, set in the present day after the main action of the novel, Ferber introduces this idea of exclusion by describing Jett Rink's airport and his significantly named Conquistador Hotel, where the lavish, vulgar, spare-no-expense buildings include segregated rest rooms: "One sign read DAMAS. Another, CABALLEROS" (41). Ferber further emphasizes the imperial nature of the "country" of Texas through the device of a pair of minor characters, the deposed king and queen of Sargovia, who accompany the Benedicts to Jett Rink's lavish party and continually compare their own small country with "the seemingly endless reaches of Bick Benedict's empire" (36). In another scene of exclusion that foreshadows one of the novel's major episodes, the king and queen are turned away at the door because of their skin color: "No Mexicans allowed at this party, that's orders and besides none's invited that's sure" (55). Bick rescues the pair, explaining that the doorman has made a mistake, but the closed-door policy that occasioned the incident derives from the same nativist-inspired barriers that Leslie challenges after finding and, with Uncle Bawley's help, hiding a young Mexican boy who has crossed the border illegally.

The most thematically significant episode of racial exclusion occurs near the end of the novel when Leslie, Luz, Juana, and grandson Jordy stop at a roadside diner. Ferber has already established the characters' coloring: Luz, a true Benedict, is blonde, but Leslie, her Mexican-American daughter-in-law Juana, and Juana's son Jordy all have black hair and dark eyes. While Luz parks the car, the rest enter the restaurant and are refused service:

"We don't serve Mexicans here." . . .

"You can't be talking to me!" Leslie said.

"I sure can. I'm talking to all of you. Our rule here is no Mexicans served and I don't want no ruckus. So—out!" . . .

Luz came blithely in, she stared a moment at the little group on

whose faces was written burning anger; at the openmouthed men and women at the counter and tables.

"Heh, what's going on here!" she said. . . .

Leslie spoke before he could repeat the words. "This man won't serve us. He says he won't serve Mexicans." . . .

"You son of a bitch!" said Miss Luz Benedict. . . . "I'll tell my father! He'll kill you! Do you know who my father is! He's—"

"No! No, Luz. No name. Come."

As they went they heard through the open doorway, the voices of the man and woman raised again in dispute.

"You crazy, Floyd! Only the kid and his ma was cholos,⁶ not the others."

"Aw, the old one was, black hair and sallow, you can't fool me."
(439-40)

Insulated by a lifetime of race and class privilege from such slights, Leslie at first protests not the "no Mexicans" policy but her inclusion in it ("You can't be talking to me"). Her sense of justice overrides her initial reaction, however, and, now classed as one of the people whose rights she has championed throughout her life, Leslie silently accepts both her complicity in the system she has been powerless to change and the justice of the leveling process she undergoes. The abuses of imperial power have traveled full circle, as she later tells Bick: "You see. It's caught up with you[;] it's caught up with us. It always does" (63). Accustomed to ruling others based on an ideology of ethnic privilege and private property, the Benedicts find themselves judged by the very principles they had preached.

This sense of a just retribution recurs in George Stevens's 1956 film adaptation of the novel. The film makes several changes to the book: for example, an additional daughter is added, so as to pair one daughter with Jett Rink and another with Bob Dietz, the idealistic young progressive farmer; and Ferber's elaborate scheme of blond Benedicts and dark Lynntons is not carried out. The greatest shift is in the nature of the decades-long disputes between Leslie and her husband, Bick. In the book version, Leslie continually presses Bick for a greater degree of social justice; the film preserves Leslie's desire for social change, but her confrontations with Bick are instead centered on gender issues and the freedom of the individual. In the film, the theme of gender issues runs parallel to that of racism, but Leslie takes a more passive role in effecting social change. The scene in the diner is staged as a literal fight against prejudice, but Bick acts out of a sense of justice; he is not prodded by Leslie to take a stand. In the film,

Bick protests the shabby treatment of a Mexican family and then starts a fight with the owner of the place as "The Yellow Rose of Texas" plays in the background. After Bick loses the fight, Sarge, the owner, contemptuously tosses a framed sign onto Bick's crumpled body: "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone"—which, according to the rule of "might makes right" and private property that Bick has upheld all his life, Sarge has a perfect legal if not moral right to do.⁷

In addition to debunking regional conventions, both Ferber and Lane substantially rewrote the national myth of limitless lands. In her early autobiographical novel *Diverging Roads*, which she called "the only book I've ever seriously written" (Holtz 77), Lane directly addresses the question of land ownership. After a career as a telegraph operator, her heroine, Helen Davies, marries and is abandoned by her husband, whereupon she takes over his job as a realtor selling undeveloped farmland in northern California. In this work, Lane somewhat romantically suggests that the question of land ownership rests on a partnership that draws together the elemental forces of farmers and land. As a weary Helen confides in her childhood sweetheart, Paul: "A real-estate salesman hasn't any real reason for existing. . . . We aren't needed a bit. The people would simply take the land if they weren't like horses, too stupid to know their own strength. . . . We're just a lot of parasites living off the land without giving anything in return" (*Diverging Roads* 264–65). By the time of *Free Land*, however, Lane's pessimism about the idea of land ownership and the pioneer dream shows in David Beaton's failure despite heroic efforts. Equally skeptical about the rewards of hard work, Ferber uses similar tropes of unearned wealth gained through oil discoveries or gambling to reject American dream ideology. For example, Sabra Cravat's farm, the only fruitful land around the town of Osage, is found to be so only because the soil lacks the oil deposits that enrich the rest of the town. Her careful husbandry, a staple fiction of the homesteading myth, is dwarfed and rendered irrelevant by the unexpected and unearned wealth of the oil fields. Ferber also speaks more directly to the colonization of nature and culture in the West by linking environmental and cultural destruction as she does in her description of the oil lands of Oklahoma and the despoliation of Cherokee land. As Ferber later wrote, "For centuries the Grabbers had gone their way, unchecked. . . . There it all lay in this fabulous virgin continent, and no one to stop them; no one who cared enough or had courage enough or sufficient foresight to sense the inevitable result of this ravaging" (*A Kind of Magic* 114).

Another familiar theme in these regional novels, the creation of an

American aesthetic through collecting objects of material culture, raises the possibility of a multicultural revision of "Americana" more inclusive than the conservative definition of American editions and artifacts valued by characters such as Percy Gryce in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, but it does so at the risk of outright theft of another culture. This collection of objects takes at least two forms, the first being the preservation of one's own cultural past through the preservation of significant objects. In a similar way, the culture of Ferber's *Cimarron* relies heavily on classic books, but Sabra values books as objects rather than as texts. When Sabra begins her literary society, the Philomatheia Club, for example, she does not bother to read the books she assigns to others. Like the Thanatopsis Club, Sinclair Lewis's satiric version of a book club in *Main Street*, or Edith Wharton's Lunch Club from "Xingu," for "ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone" (Wharton 209), the Philomatheia Club values books and reading only as status symbols, and it quickly degenerates into a forum for social competition.

The second form of preservation is the acquisition of objects from another culture, as when Magnolia Ravenal of *Show Boat* sings African-American spirituals to further her career, an appropriation at once tribute and theft.⁸ In Ferber's and Lane's work, this acquisition and consumption both of objects and of the collected tales of a romanticized, nostalgic history suggests what Brigitte Georgi-Findlay has described as the 1880s "pre-historic craze and the fascination with antiquity" rooted in ethnology and notions of romantic primitivism (219). In Ferber's work, artifacts such as Selina Peake DeJong's antique Dutch china in *So Big* and Sabra Cravat's handwoven blanket from Mother Bridget exemplify cultural borrowing. Woven by Mother Bridget from strong yarn with an Indian blue dye, the blanket represents a multiply alien culture by evoking the long history of the mission school, its Native-American students, and Roman Catholicism. She gives it to the unheeding Sabra, who carries as a talisman Indian-inspired art into Indian country but fails to see the multiple messages within its beauty.

In Lane's *Free Land*, another act of misguided collection becomes cultural appropriation and outright theft. An educated Easterner and the frontier town's man of science, Dr. Thorne, steals the desiccated, mummified corpse of an Indian baby from an aboveground burial grove. Flushed with excitement at the "sensation" it will cause among scientists, Thorne plans to "send it to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C." even as David Beaton suggests that "Barnum'd pay you a young fortune for that" (104). In this scene, Lane neatly links two forms of cultural theft; the "scientific" ethno-

graphic observation of the Smithsonian scientists and the tub-thumping commercialism of a P. T. Barnum amount to the same thing: exploitation of the sacred artifacts of Native-American culture for the amusement of the white man. Yet the culture to which such artifacts belong turns out to be neither vanishing nor dead, as Thorne had thought, but very much alive: shortly thereafter, the Indians show up demanding the body, and only the best efforts of the strongest and most respected man in the book can save the situation. Gebbert, a legendary railroad contractor about whom the men compose songs, has all the qualities of a hero: he treats his men fairly, shares their living arrangements, and is not afraid to steal from the institution—the railroad—that steals from him, for “a man that won’t steal from a railroad ain’t honest” (107).⁹ As a hero, he knows enough to respect native culture. A legendary frontiersman, Gebbert speaks with the chiefs respectfully, using “their lingo,” and sends David to get the body back within three days, dismissing someone’s boast that “any white man can handle six Indians” with “Maybe. Custer’s men didn’t” (112). The race-to-the-rescue plotting of this episode overshadows but cannot entirely obscure the true tension between the contemporary technological wizardry of telegraph and train used to regain the mummified body and the vanishing but still existent past of confrontations between native peoples and white settlers. Significantly, neither the characters nor the narrative voice mount any kind of defense for this action; indeed, all unite in calling Dr. Thorne a fool.

Despite their status as best-selling regional authors, then, both Ferber and Lane consciously challenged some of the country’s favorite myths about itself. As Ferber herself put it when analyzing her books’ staying power, “In their very core there lay something more solid, more deeply dimensional than mere entertainment or readability. They had power they had theme they had protest” (*A Kind of Magic* 125). Lane and Ferber wrote popular middlebrow fiction, and both understood the limitations of the forms they had chosen for their writing. Yet in creating middlebrow works that straddle the boundary between high culture and low, in writing novels that both promote and critique regional myths, and in representing race in ways that disrupt the status quo, these two authors change the rules of the genre and, in so doing, reveal their “hard and bitter purpose”: to expose and protest the disparity between national promise and regional reality.

Notes

1. See Rose Wilder Lane’s interview with Almanzo Wilder prior to writing *Free Land* in *A “Little House” Sampler*.

2. Laura Ingalls Wilder reports the story of the Benders in the *Pioneer Girl* manuscript, the genesis for the “Little House” series. Although John Miller and other Wilder biographers point out that the dates of the Ingalls family’s residence in Kansas would have made contact with the Benders improbable, Wilder remembered the horror she felt as a child upon hearing that a little girl her own age had been buried alive.
3. The reluctance she shows is part of the stereotypical representation of the Prairie Madonna, according to Myres and others.
4. In addition to its later meaning of “native of Israel,” *sabra* means “prickly pear.”
5. Edna Ferber, *Cimarron* (New York: Doubleday, 1930), 172. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
6. S.v. “cholos”: “Disparaging. A Mexican or Mexican-American,” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*.
7. For a more extended discussion of this film and Tino Villanueva’s *Scene from the Movie “Giant,”* see Rafael Pérez-Torres’s “Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice,” *American Literature* 70 (1998): 153–76. Pérez-Torres shows that “In *Giant* mestizaje does not provide an empowered subjectivity, does not offer agency in the epic battle over racial/national redefinitions. The titanic white father stands up for the Mexicans, represented as they are by an ineffectual old man, helpless youngsters, and sobbing women” (160).
8. Magnolia has learned these songs by listening to Julie Dozier, Queenie, and others on the Cotton Blossom. In *Love and Theft*, Lott includes a “self-serving” recollection from the performer Ben Cotton that closely matches Magnolia’s experience: “I used to sit with them in front of their cabins, and we would start the banjo twanging, and their voices would ring out in the quiet night air in their weird melodies. They did not quite understand me. I was the first white man they had seen who sang as they did; but we were brothers for the time being and were perfectly happy.” Despite the harmful effects of such appropriation, Lott suggests, “in addition to the minor disasters bohemia has perpetrated . . . there is in its activities an implicit tribute to, or at the very least a self-marginalizing mimicry of, black culture’s male representatives” (50).
9. In writing *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Lane questioned the episode in which Uncle Hi in effect steals supplies from the railroad company; Wilder replied that the railroad companies regularly cheated the contractors and that this type of “settling with the company” was common, adding that a common saying was “A man that won’t steal from the railroad ain’t honest.” See Holtz and Romines.

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The Cosmopolitan Regionalism of Zona Gale's Friendship Village

DEBORAH LINDSAY WILLIAMS

In "What Women Won in Wisconsin," a 1922 essay published in the *Nation*, Zona Gale argued that the rest of the country should follow Wisconsin's example and pass an Equal Rights Amendment to eradicate the discriminatory laws against women that remained on the books even after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. The Nineteenth Amendment had granted women only the vote; in every state of the union other than Wisconsin, women still lacked legal equality.¹ The Wisconsin law allowed women freedoms such as serving on a jury, holding civil service jobs, and claiming residency somewhere other than where their husbands lived. Gale presented an earlier version of this brief essay on the floor of the Wisconsin Senate, and it testifies to her equally strong commitments to feminism and regionalism. She uses her local politics to fuel her hopes for national change and emphasizes that what seem to be "women's issues" affect both men and women: "In this matter there is no woman's standpoint and no man's standpoint," she asserts. "There is only the need of our common citizenship to rid our statute books of these vestiges of the old English common law . . . do this for women—yes; and for men; and for the general welfare; and for the children and the children's children." Gale argued that unless other states passed similar laws, the "spiritual genius" belonging to women could not be "liberated into the world." Each state needed to sweep away the "meshes of little circumstances" that prevented women from achieving the "equality of opportunity to express