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"WILD MEN" AND DISSENTING VOICES
NARRATIVE DISRUPTION IN *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*

DONNA M. CAMPBELL

Long considered to be a work celebrating traditional pioneer values, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, has in recent years come under increasing attack for its stereotypic racial representations and attitudes. In one notable instance, novelist Michael Dorris describes trying to read the novels to his daughters and stopping because of the unfavorable depictions of Native American characters and Ma's "unreconstructed" bigotry.[1] Dorris and others present a compelling argument about the potential negative effects of such representations, yet to dismiss the work as though Wilder's vision of other races represents a monolithic whole is to deny the ways in which the novel raises questions about racial identity even as it affirms some negative stereotypes.[2] As the most prominent novel in the *Little House* series featuring Native Americans and the only one featuring an African-American character, *Little House on the Prairie* is distinguished as well by its narrative ambivalence toward these figures. The central conflict in the series between Pa's pioneer spirit and Ma's civilizing impulse has become a critical commonplace, but another source of creative tension deserves consideration: the ways in which the competing discourses of the novel's "wild men" interrupt and transform the stability of the narrative voice.[3]

The multiple voices and the emphasis on language that shape the child Laura in this book suggest more than the simple progression from being Pa's wild "half-pint" to being Ma's civilized "good girl."[4] In *Little House on the Prairie*, the "civilizing" authorial voice can mediate among but not silence the disruptions

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posed by the "wild men" who represent alternative cultures; Wilder's West is still a contested narrative space where the discourse of manifest destiny does not yet hold sway. Wilder's ambivalent representation of "wild men" as a figure for the threatening yet heroic "otherness" of other races,[6] her unusually varied techniques of narrative voice and characterization, and the inconsistencies through which the text undercuts its surface reveal *Little House on the Prairie* to be a work whose linguistic tensions expose disturbing possibilities beneath the surface of its prairie pastoral.

The first of these features, the novel's depiction of "wild men," functions not only as a counternarrative to the reassurance of the authorial voice but also as a structural device within the novel. As several critics have pointed out, the "wild" Indians contrast with the novel's notions of gentility, and, according to Elizabeth Segel, "the term 'wild' does not hold for [Laura] the negative connotations it that it does for her mother."[7] The oppositions in this work between wildness and civilization are embodied in its characters: considered schematically, the Scotts represent the extremes of a conventionally "civilized" view with which Ma is affiliated, and the Native Americans, with Pa as interpreter, occupy the opposite extreme. In this work, Laura's cumulative understanding of the relationship between West and East, frontier and settlement, nature and culture, progresses through her encounters with men figured as both increasingly "wild" and increasingly heroic: Pa, Mr. Edwards, Dr. Tan, and finally Soldat du Chêne.

Pa, the first of these characters, sets the standard for combining heroism with wildness. Disliking boundaries and limitations, Pa shares with Laura both his restlessness and his imaginative power, characteristics that remain constant and help to explain his chameleonlike ability to take on a multiplicity of social and familial roles. Hamida Bosmajian notes that Pa prefers "to sit in his favorite place—the threshold,"[8] and indeed he remains more a liminal than a transitional figure here, eventually able to usher his family into the communal life of the frontier town while his own westward-looking spirit prevents his accepting a stable position in it.[9] As a figure poised always on the threshold between wildness and civilization, Pa embodies elements of both, making him uniquely suited to be the interpreter between cultures. Thus it is Pa who gives Laura the word that she clutches like a talisman—"papoose," a word that simultaneously defamiliarizes the idea of the baby (Grace) that Laura already knows and renders less threatening the experience of "wildness" that she will confront before the year is out. Laura understands this interpretive skill as part of Pa's overall claims to omniscience. After all, she reasons, "Pa knew all about wild animals, so he must know about wild men, too."[10] Her naively insensitive equation of wild men with animals is mitigated, however, by Pa's own appearance as a "wild" man. Like the Osages', Pa's hair sticks up; when Ma teases him, saying "You look like a wild man, Charles" (114), he admits that even at his most civilized—that is, during their courtship—he could not make it lie down. Laura further identifies the Indians with Pa, noting that they carry "a knife like Pa's hunting knife and a hatchet like Pa's hatchet" (138); perhaps more important, she equates the Indian hunter's motive in killing the panther with Pa's own motives in hunting it, thus attributing emotional as well as physical parity to the two cultures.

Not only Pa's appearance but his language marks his status as a cultural intermediary. The fictionalizing impulse and discursive mode of storytelling that characterized Pa's speech in *Little House in the Big Woods* here give way to exposition and persuasion. Stopping well short of advocacy, he nonetheless becomes the novel's voice for the Native American point of view. The rational tone of his expository mode of speech is nevertheless punctuated both by fragmentary, emotional outbursts that expose the dangers of the frontier (his early reference to the "band of screaming dev—" [144]) and by the comforting language of cliché ("all's well that ends well") through which he

shapes the family's awareness of its situation. Laura's "domestication" involves moving from an initial curiosity about Indians toward a position that incorporates Ma's generalized and habituated dread. By contrast, Pa progressively discards his early, unthinking optimism to adopt a more complex vision that involves not only a better interpretation of Native American behavior but a degree of sympathy for those that inhabit the "empty" land, a movement signified by his gradual awareness of the importance of the Osage trail. Initially dismissing it as "some old trail" (55), he admits later on that he "wouldn't have built the house so close to it if [he'd] known it [was] a highroad" (227). Significantly, this awareness marks a greater willingness to articulate the family's plight as well. For example, Pa overrides Ma's objections in order to tell Laura and Mary of the Indian war-cry, for once admitting the girls into the fellowship of danger that the family faces:

> "That yell's enough to scare anybody to death," he said. "My mouth's so dry I couldn't whistle a tune to save my life. Bring me some water, Laura."
>
> That made Laura feel better. (293)

Acknowledging his own fears, as Pa does here, legitimizes the family's emotional response, and Pa follows up this confession of potential weakness with a request that asserts his paternal authority, a stabilizing gesture that reassures Laura. Motivated by caution but also sympathy, he begins to meet the Indians as equals on their own ground, in part conceding their rights by chaining the dog, Jack, the novel's symbol of aggressive ownership and unthinking tenacity, to let Soldat du Chêne pass on "his path. . . . An Indian trail long before we came" (231). He likewise quiets the settlers' fears by explaining that the Indians "had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks" (284). In a marked reversal of his earlier position, near the end of the story he strikes Jack and salutes Soldat du Chêne during the Osage expulsion. In effect, Pa internalizes two competing narratives involving that symbolic path, one of its conquest, or what Ann Romines in another context terms the nineteenth-century "traditional linear plot in which conflict and complication advance toward resolution and completion,"[11] and one of his initiation into a kind of sympathetic identification with the Osage who use it.

The second of the novel's "wild men," Mr. Edwards, signals his nature more overtly. As a "wildcat from Tennessee," Mr. Edwards, with his coonskin cap, tall boots, prowess at spitting, and courtliness toward Ma, clearly represents the vanishing tradition of southwestern humor and its "ring-tailed roarers," a connection Wilder emphasizes through his signature song, "Old Dan Tucker." Best known for its tall-tale heroes such as Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs, and George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood, southwestern humor sketches used dialect, elaborately burlesqued speech, exaggerated exploits, and broad physical humor to elevate lying to an art form from which "ladies" were excluded.[12] As a representative of this tradition, Mr. Edwards in *Little House on the Prairie* at once evokes both its vanishing frontier and its genre-based affront to the genteel realism of the narrative voice. His domestication through "neighborliness" parallels and comments upon Pa's own, for his exchange of labor with Pa is the first representation of interdependency that Wilder shows, as if to validate the idea that even frontiersmen must become socialized to survive. That Mr. Edwards signifies a rich though unspoken rough tradition gains further credence from the manuscript version of *The Long Winter*, in which he gambles, palms cards, drinks, and evades his taxes, apologizing to Ma by saying, "I know you don't hold with playing cards Ma'am. . . . But it wasn't rightly their money so I just kept it."[13] As Rosa Moore has shown, only his tax evasion remains in the final version, perhaps in part because it illustrates the distrust of government, respect for minding one's own business, and exaggerated tale-tell-

ing that suggest the tradition from which he springs. Moreover, the ironic voice of "Mr. Edwards Meets Santa Claus," an unusually playful departure from Wilder's customarily serious tone, suggests the intertextual interruption of southwestern humor. The dual voices here suggest heteroglossia, which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. . . . It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author."[14] The narrative problem Wilder faces here is to satisfy two opposing audiences: younger readers whose belief in Santa Claus must remain undisturbed, and older readers whose genre-based expectations of realism must not be violated. Allowing Mr. Edwards to narrate the tale creates what Bakhtin calls a "double-voiced discourse" that satisfies both audiences, one with belief and the other with humor:

> "Have you ever met up, down yonder, with two little young girls named Mary and Laura?"
>
> "I surely am acquainted with them," Mr. Edwards replied.
>
> "It rests heavy on my mind," said Santa Claus. "They are both of them sweet, pretty, good little young things, and I know they are expecting me. I surely do hate to disappoint two good little girls like them. Yet with the water the way it is, I can't ever make it across that creek. I can figure no way whatsoever to get to their cabin this year" (246).

Like the careful grounding of supernatural elements in realistic detail that mark this as a tall tale, Mr. Edwards' deadpan delivery, emphatic repetition ("surely am," "sweet, pretty, good little young things"), and dialect-inflected diction ("yonder") suggest the roots of this segment in the tradition of southwestern humor.

If the tall tale customarily features a human, albeit larger than life, character amidst extraordinary circumstances, Mr. Edwards' adaptation shows instead a mythical being in ordinary circumstances; like any seasoned pioneer, "Santa Claus traveled with a pack-mule in the Southwest" (247) and "rode well, for a man of his weight and build" (248). Indeed, the chapter functions almost as a "carnivalesque" interlude that provides momentary release from the tension of the main narrative; it draws upon, and also plays upon or parodies, Wilder's equally careful and realistic descriptions earlier in the book. Not only does Wilder thus neatly sidestep the question of belief for her young readers, but she preserves the text from a potentially sentimental situation, that of what Charles Frey calls the "humble child's rich Christmas,"[15] by allowing the narrative's disruption by another voice. To allow this voice free rein would be to destroy the generic constraints of realistic representation within which the novel exists, tipping the balance toward both the fantastic inventions of the tall tale and the decidedly ungenteel realism of frontier life. Its presence, however, suggests a multiplicity of popular narratives both raised and suppressed in the work, preparing the reader for other tales not told, such as that of the Native Americans' expulsion from the Indian territory.

Dr. Tan, the third of Wilder's heroic figures, appears simultaneously exotic because of his race and his association with the Osage and "civilized" because of his status as an educated man. He represents a doubly alternative authority to that of the white settlers, for in addition to his race and association with the Osage, he is a homeopathic physician, although the quinine he gives was standard treatment in allopathic (traditional) medicine as well.[16] He restores order and safety when Laura's world has been turned upside down by the Ingalls family's bout with malaria. Another departure from straight narrative, Laura's semidelirious point of view in this section registers only a series of vivid, fragmentary images, as if she can distinguish reality from her

fever dreams only with difficulty: Ma's "red face" (188), Pa collapsed on the floor, Dr. Tan's "black face," the "fat woman" who turns out to be Mrs. Scott. Throughout the book, material objects and a chronologically ordered routine constitute Laura's security, yet her visual reference points have been disrupted, a disjuncture that signifies the most serious danger that the family has yet faced: "She would see Pa crouching by the fire in the middle of the night, then suddenly sunshine hurt her eyes and Ma fed her broth from a spoon. Something dwindled slowly, smaller and smaller, till it was tinier than the tiniest thing. Then slowly it swelled till it was larger than anything could be" (186-87). Space and time, size and shape dissolve into conflated and shifting images in this section. In terse, abrupt sentences the narrative voice reflects the plot's internal dislocations when even Pa, upon whom the family's security depends, is rendered helpless. Time collapses upon itself as Laura alternates between waking and sleeping, burning fever and chills, the "slow voice drawl[ing]" and the fast voices "jabber[ing]" (187). In a sequence that reflects stylistically such feverish perceptions, Laura experiences Dr. Tan in a series of equally refracted impressions (a "black face," an arm, a hand), recognizing throughout only the consistent healing power that these elements share. Similarly, the multiple voices that signal this refracted reality can be vanquished only when Dr. Tan's "mellow voice" and "rolling, jolly laugh" (192) replace the hallucinatory fever voices and reorient Laura to reality. A transitional figure like Mr. Edwards and Soldat du Chêne, Dr. Tan both literally saves the lives of the family and figuratively provides an associative aural bridge for Laura to return to a safe reality, one in which difference in culture need not be threatening.

The fourth such heroic figure, Soldat du Chêne, shares with Dr. Tan the distinction of saving the Ingalls family when they are helpless to save themselves. Although Virginia Wolf has established that Wilder "received a letter from R. B. Selridge of Muskogee, Oklahoma, confirming that 'the Chief of the Osages at that time was named Le Soldat-du-Chêne,'" other sources do not support Wilder's recollections.[17] In *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains*, Willard H. Rollings identifies three members of the Osage tribe by this name. The first, who may have been Soldat du Chêne (Oak Soldier) or Soldat du Chiene (Dog Soldier), traveled with Osage leaders to New Orleans in 1794 "to meet with the Spanish governor of Louisiana" but was killed on the way by the Chickasaw; the second was "a prominent nineteenth-century Osage soldier."[18] Another candidate is the Little Osage chief Dog Soldier, who signed many treaties between 1815 and 1835. He had been invited to Washington by President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 and had had his portrait painted in Philadelphia that same year.[19] Whether Wilder researched documents until she discovered this name, as William Anderson suggests, or recalled it but could not find documentary evidence to support her memory, as Donald Zochert claims, may never be determined.[20] What matters is that Wilder took great pains to render Soldat du Chêne as a hero both historically and fictionally in her story, even though the historical figure had himself been dead for many years. Like other such figures, including Santa Claus, Pa, Big Jerry, and Mr. Edwards, Soldat du Chêne appears and disappears as a lone figure on the prairie, a placement that emphasizes his mythic status. As a person who mediates between Indian and white worlds, he is associated with Pa, and his presence in the novel places Pa in the company of heroes. When Pa "squatted down by the Indian, and they sat there, friendly but not saying a word" (228), they share a companionable silence because Pa ironically cannot speak French, the language of diplomacy. This silent communion not only contrasts with the later sounds from the Osage camp but anticipates another important event: for the Verdigris River settlers, the most important words in the book, also unheard by the family, are those that Soldat du Chêne speaks to avert war.[21]

Later in the series, another Native American character, the mixed-race Big Jerry, similarly averts catastrophe for the Ingalls family, not once but twice. Like Mr. Edwards, Big Jerry combines dubious morality, a knack for playing poker, frontier fighting skills, and a kind heart; he speaks courteously to Ma and cares for Old Johnny, the wizened Irishman who serves as waterboy for the workmen. Like Soldat du Chêne, he epitomizes freedom and acquires mythic status from his first appearance: "The flaming red shirt and the white horse vanished in the blazing golden light. . . . Somehow that moment when the beautiful, free pony and the wild man rode into the sun would last forever."[22] (65). Early in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, he saves the Ingalls family from horse thieves; in return, Pa warns Jerry of the ambush awaiting him. Like Soldat du Chêne, Big Jerry uses the right powerful words that cannot be named in the text, this time "all mixed with swear words" (115), to save the family from an angry group. It is his sponsorship that allows Pa's defiance of a group of railroad construction workers in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, an action that, like Soldat du Chêne's actions as a lone individual against the crowd, is a heroic gesture of mythic proportions. In granting heroic status to Soldat du Chêne, Big Jerry, and others pictured as "wild," Wilder destabilizes the text's narrative surface and complicates its relentless march toward a "civilized" future.[23] Like Soldat du Chêne's words to the Osage and Pa's in confronting the construction workers, Big Jerry's action is less consonant with the "Noble Savage" stereotype that critics have charged Wilder with perpetuating than with that of the classic isolated Western hero of the Zane Grey genre fiction she read avidly late in her life.[24]

The second level at which the text undercuts itself is that of discourse, which John Stephens has defined as "the complex process of encoding the story which involves choices of vocabulary, of syntax, of order of presentation."[25] The text of *Little House on the Prairie* reveals a series of uncharacteristic narrative stances on the part of character and narrator alike. Thus Ma, whose speech is flat and literal through the rest of the series except for a generous sprinkling of aphorisms, initially confuses Mary and Laura with her figurative language. When the visiting Indians have gone, Ma tells the girls that "the plow and all our seeds for next year are in that bundle of furs" (234), a statement that they misinterpret before understanding the abstract level of value (trading furs for plow and seeds) to which she refers. Another significant variation is Laura's plea to "Get me that little Indian baby!" (308), which she gives as a direct order to Pa, an imperative form that she does not repeat elsewhere in the series despite her occasional challenges to his authority. The gesture of appropriation that she makes here far exceeds Pa's initial promise that she would see a papoose, although her impulse follows logically from Pa's earlier racialized objectification of the Indian child as a "papoose," not a baby. Here, however, Pa silences Laura by saying that the "Indian woman wants to keep her baby" (309), thus recognizing the legitimacy of the Osages' affectional ties and restoring the child to its proper parity with their own baby, Grace. Laura's inability to express her feelings ("She could not say what she meant") likewise occurs only a few places in the series when she feels most deeply, notably in *Little Town on the Prairie* when, feeling helpless and trapped as she does here, she resorts to the "wooden swearing" of slamming onto the desk the books that symbolize her unwelcome future as a schoolteacher. In both instances her body communicates the desire for freedom that she is helpless to voice, as Laura's "shameful" tears and unladylike gestures communicate what she cannot otherwise express.

At the level of story, Laura's questions emphasize her own curiosity and foreshadow the family's eventual removal from the land; at the level of discourse, Laura voices the unresolved conflict not only between Ma and Pa but that inherent within their presence in

Indian Territory itself. An early example of this function occurs in chapter 4:

> "Why don't you like Indians, Ma?" Laura asked, and she caught a drip of molasses with her tongue.
>
> "I just don't like them; and don't lick your fingers, Laura," said Ma.
>
> "This is Indian country, isn't it?" Laura said. "What did we come to their country for, if you don't like them?" (46-47)

Like Huck Finn, Laura here speaks from an innocent perspective that allows the reader to see more than the characters see. She poses the question that in effect unravels the logic of Ma and Pa's position: it *is* Indian country, and the moral issues (the Indians' taking cornbread, the settlers' taking land) are different in degree, not kind. Moreover, Ma's refusal to state her reasons stands out as irrational precisely because it runs contrary to her usual practice of patient explanation. Laura's transgression here is more serious than licking molasses with her fingers, for she brings to the surface an uncomfortable question that Ma and Pa prefer not to consider. In focusing on the smaller issue of Laura's manners, Ma engages in the kind of "silencing" or brushing aside questions that she also does with Pa (in censoring his description of the wolves) and Mrs. Scott (in her story of the "Minnesota massacres").

As is evident in this parallel scene from chapter 18, one function of Laura's character is to articulate the unspoken questions of the reader and to challenge the novel's unspoken defense of manifest destiny:[26]

> "But please tell me where the voice of Alfarata went?"
>
> "Oh, I suppose she went west," Ma answered. "That's what the Indians do."
>
> "Why do they do that, Ma?" Laura asked.
>
> "Why do they go west?"
>
> "They have to," Ma said.
>
> "Why do they have to?"
>
> "The government makes them, Laura," said Pa. "Now go to sleep."
>
> He played the fiddle softly for a while. Then Laura asked, "Please, Pa, can I ask just one more question?"
>
> "May I," said Ma.
>
> Laura began again. "Pa, please, may I—"
>
> "What is it?" Pa asked. It was not polite for little girls to interrupt, but of course Pa could do it.
>
> "Will the government make these settlers go west?"
>
> "Yes," Pa said. "When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That's why we're here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?"
>
> "Yes, Pa," Laura said. "But, Pa, I thought this was Indian territory. Won't it make the Indians mad to have to—"
>
> "No more questions, Laura," Pa said, firmly. "Go to sleep" (236-37)

Laura's innocent critique is here doubly reinforced by the narrative choice to juxtapose and implicitly contextualize it through the song that Ma sings, "The Blue Juniata." Another of the popular forms in this work, the sentimental ballad mingles two voices, that of the singer, "bright Alfarata," and that of her warrior lover who "rings his voice in thunder loud / From height to height resounding" (235). In her extensive discussion of *Little House on the Prairie* in *Constructing the Little House*, Ann Romines notes that this song is one of the few in the Little House series for which a complete text is provided, a distinction that "signals its special importance."[27] Echoing as it does the sounds from the tribes' camp by the creek, "The Blue Juniata" ironically provides a safe, romanticized view of Indians that quells Ma's fears. It naturalizes the silencing of Alfarata's voice—her removal—as a result of the inevitable processes of time, an outcome

that echoes Pa's explanation of manifest destiny.

In this passage, both Pa and Ma attempt to suppress Laura's questions by referring to higher forms of authority, Ma as guardian of manners in the private sphere of the home, and Pa as the spokesman for public, government-sanctioned policies. Significantly, in the discussion that follows the ballad, neither Pa nor, more surprisingly, Ma tries to legitimize the family's presence in Indian Territory through any claims of moral justice or logic. At best Laura's questions cause them to retreat into uncomfortable silence, thus suggesting their level of ethical discomfort. As Ma's brother Tom points out in a later book in the series when describing the settlers' being driven out of the Black Hills, "It was Indian country. Strictly speaking, we had no right there."[28] Moreover, Wilder calls into question the authority of Pa's unusually curt response by her narrative aside: "It was not polite for little girls to interrupt, but of course Pa could do it." The phrase "of course" emphasizes and initially seems to excuse Pa's transgression against the code of manners. However, if an inconsistently applied rule betrays either its own injustice or the guilt of those who break it, the "of course" then reverses its meaning: "Of course" Pa should not interrupt, and, by implication, neither should he break the other rule under discussion by illegally occupying the land of the Osage people. The scene further undercuts the family's position when it pits Pa's "word straight from Washington" (273) with the Indians' "answer from Washington" (272). With populist tongue firmly in cheek, Wilder satirizes the two-faced nature of politicians and the press through the ironic contrast between the newspaper that "proved" Pa was right and the Ingalls family's eventual ouster from the land. More serious here is Pa's uncharacteristic behavior, for in silencing Laura's questions, he has, in a sense, denied his own nature and reversed roles with Ma. Belief in the romantic pipe dream of manifest destiny has caused him to become, like Ma, the voice of civilization.

As if to further undercut the novel's "voice of civilization," Wilder displaces its most troublesome racist sentiments onto the characters who most clearly embody the views of nineteenth-century America: Mr. and Mrs. Scott. Just as Pa is linked to the Osage people although he does not advocate their position, so Ma listens to the Scotts' tales of the "Minnesota massacres" although she does not explain her dislike as does the voluble Mrs. Scott. Despite their status as "good neighbors," the Scotts are almost as foreign to this environment as the hapless "tenderfeet" who earn Pa's scorn for not chaining their horses in the final chapter (330). Throughout the Little House series, Wilder makes a point of skin tone: later books in the series such as *Little Town on the Prairie*, for example, associate tanned skin, like Pa's and Almanzo's, with favorable qualities, whereas a fair skin, like Nellie Oleson's, suggests not only excessive civilization but duplicity. If *Little House on the Prairie's* most heroic figures suggest ethnic "otherness" through their exotically dark features, then Mr. Scott's "hair bleached by the sun" and "bright red and scaly" skin (150) signal his difference immediately. Moreover, except for the Osage nation and the ubiquitous horse thieves, Mr. Scott presents the greatest possible human danger to the family through his lack of judgment. Wilder gives a prominent place to his foolish behavior in "Fresh Water to Drink." Mr. Scott's rash behavior in refusing to send the candle down the well to test for dangerous gases, and his subsequent near-asphyxiation when he tries to dig deeper in the well without such a test, needlessly imperil both his life and Pa's, for Pa must risk his own life to rescue Mr. Scott. The narrative suggests that to be secure in an untested opinion or prejudice, such as Mr. Scott's confidence about the safety of the well, is at best foolhardy, at worst nearly disastrous.

Mrs. Scott presents a subtler bad example of the civilized point of view. She, too, is a "good neighbor," caring for the Ingalls family during their bout with malaria. Yet Mrs. Scott is the character who repeatedly voices the

notorious sentiment that begins "The only good Indian . . . ," the source of much criticism of the book. Significantly, neither Ma nor Pa repeats this sentiment directly. In fact, Pa takes pains to refute it at the end of "Indian War-Cry," although he is not otherwise averse to making his own sweeping judgments, commenting later that "Hanging's too good for horse-thieves" (329). In repeating this damaging aphorism, Mrs. Scott speaks with the voice of what Bakhtin calls "authoritative discourse," which "always remains, in the novel, something that falls out of the artistic context" (344). It is this flat voice of authority that permits no dissension and seeks to "distance itself from the zone of contact" (345) that the dialogic voices within any novel constantly struggle to overcome. Mrs. Scott's character largely embodies this principle; it is she who continually alludes to the Minnesota massacres and seeks to justify the manifest destiny of the white settlers: "Land knows, they'd never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that'll farm it. That's only common sense and justice" (211). But Mrs. Scott's "common sense" also includes the idea that the night air, and the watermelons grown in it, can transmit malaria. The power of her "authoritative discourse," rendered impressive by being repeated in isolation by Wilder's critics, is deflated by the novelistic context that renders her statements ridiculous. Her statements lose all claim to credibility when placed in the context of the wild men's competing voices that create an alternative and "internally persuasive discourse" about the Native American position. "No one knew, in those days, that fever'n'ague was malaria, and that some mosquitoes give it to people when they bite them," comments Wilder in a narrative aside (198). Invited thus from a further competing and authoritative voice, that of a twentieth-century perspective, to dismiss (as Pa does), Mrs. Scott's "common sense" approach to malaria, the reader does not hesitate to condemn the Scotts' other, and far more damaging, "common sense" theories: their indefensible and unthinking racial prejudices.

Defending *Little House on the Prairie* in an age that rightly values cultural sensitivity presents a difficult task, for the book is not free from troubling racial implications. Mrs. Scott's racist remarks cannot be lightly passed over, nor can the depersonalized descriptions (i.e., the "glittering eyes") of the anonymous Indians who help themselves to Pa's tobacco and Ma's cornbread be ignored.[29] In addition, the book's historical backdrop—the appropriations of the remaining Osage trust lands that culminated in the federal government's 15 July 1870 approval for their survey and sale[30]—registers primarily as it affects the settlers, a natural authorial distortion that, as Dorris and McAuliffe have shown, has nonetheless had damaging consequences. On the other hand, to condemn the book out of hand, to treat it as the history that it is not rather than as the literature that it is, overlooks both the interpretive gaps in its linguistic representations and the complexity of its engagement with the issue of racial otherness, including the undoubted heroism of its "wild men." Significantly, Wilder chooses not to end the novel with a solemn vision of the Osage leaving the territory. As the Ingalls family prepares to leave Kansas, Pa's optimistic perspective suggests that to be stationary in such a country is to risk being driven out, as the Scotts will be, or, worse yet, to be quite literally unable to move, like the stranded tenderfoot homesteaders in their useless wagon. Yet the book concludes with an image that, despite its historical inaccuracy, suggests parity between the Ingalls family and the Osage.[31] Far from finding the "little gray home in the West" to which Wilder alludes later in the series, the Ingalls family, like the Osage people, must forsake a comfortable stasis for movement, beginning the first of many journeys in quest of a home. *Little House on the Prairie* thus fittingly ends not with the Osage removal, but with the Ingallses' expulsion from their prairie Eden, a choice that

curiously deflates this problematic vision of pioneering America.

REFERENCES

I am indebted to Ann Romines for comments and encouragement on this essay.

1. Michael Dorris, "Trusting the Words," *Booklist* 1-15 June 1993, 1821.

2. In *The Deaths of Sybil Bolton: An American History*, his nonfiction detective story/memoir of the horrifying murder of his Osage grandmother, Dennis McAuliffe declares that he "would not want my child to read *Little House on the Prairie*. I would shield him from the slights she slings upon his ancestors" (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 113. Claiming that Pa's eyes are like Charles Manson's and that "Pa's résumé reads like that of a surfer bum in search of the perfect amber wave of grain" (112), McAuliffe argues that Wilder not only stereotypes the Osage but mocks their hunger in chapter 11, "Indians in the House." Ann Romines disputes this claim in *Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), calling "this extremely complex scene" an attempt to convey, from a white girl's viewpoint, the extraordinary stresses and tensions that burdened even the simplest contact between Euro-American females and Indian men" (67). I have followed the practice of Romines and other critics in using the terms "Native American" and "Indian" interchangably.

3. The unifying presence of this voice itself exists, as William Holtz, Anita Clair Fellman, and Rosa Ann Moore have shown, as an amalgamation of the sometimes conflicting narrative visions of Wilder and her editor and daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. The question of authorship that began with the publication of *The First Four Years* in 1971 is still being contested. Early critics of Wilder's work saw the efforts of her daughter Rose Wilder Lane as largely editorial in scope, whereas more recent criticism has focused on a more complex level of revision and collaboration. Rosa Ann Moore takes the former view in "Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Chemistry of Collaboration," *Children's Literature in Education* 11, no.3 (fall 1980): 101-9, and "Laura Ingalls Wilder's Orange Notebooks and the Art of the Little House Books," *Children's Literature* 4 (1975): 105-19. Anita Clair Fellman examines the political and social implications of collaboration in "Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane: The Politics of a Mother-Daughter Relationship," *Signs* 15, no.3 (spring 1990): 535-61) In *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), an engaging background study of the later books, John E. Miller sketches the pair's working relationship and tactfully refers to their "collaboration" as a "mother-daughter team" (95). The strongest case against Wilder's authorship is made by William Holtz, who asserts that Lane was Wilder's "ghostwriter" and a guiding force in the success of the series in his biography of Lane, *The Ghost in the Little House* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992). More recently, in *Constructing the Little House* (note 2 above), Ann Romines argues that the "uninflected narrative that Wilder initially lays out is sometimes enhanced and enriched by Lane's additions and suggestions" (47) but sometimes is not, as in the revision of the Fourth of July sequence in *Little House on the Prairie* and the Wilders' encounters with other cultures in *On the Way Home: The Diary of a Trip from South Dakota to Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

4. Several critics comment on Laura's progressive domestication through the course of the *Little House* books. See especially Louise Mowder's "Domestication of Desire: Gender, Language, and Landscape in the Little House Books," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 17, no.1 (spring 1992): 15-19. In *Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Boise: Boise State University, 1994), Fred Erisman views the series as being "in the classic tradition of the *bildungsroman*" (45).

5. Of particular use in sorting out these voices is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, or the interactive dialogue between a text's referential and fixed "transcription" of meaning and the context of that transcription, which may undercut, parody, or otherwise transform the original meaning into something quite different ("Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981]).

6. Mowder discusses the Native Americans as "other" in "Domestication of Desire" (note 4 above).

7. Elizabeth Segel, "Laura Ingalls Wilder's America: An Unflinching Assessment," *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 67.

8. Hamida Bosmajian, "Vastness and Contraction of Space in Little House on the Prairie," *Children's Literature* 11 (1983): 61.

9. In the series, Pa is by turns a trapper, farmer, railroad paymaster, and carpenter; Wilder omits Charles Ingalls's stints as hotelkeeper, storekeeper, and insurance agent. Wilder stresses the "free and independent" spirit that motivates these shifts in occupation and downplays the perilous economic

circumstances that Pa's peripatetic nature generates. For a complete account of Pa's occupations, see especially Miller's *Little Town* (note 3 above).

10. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (1935; reprint. New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 56. Subsequent page references appear in parentheses in the text.

11. Ann Romines, "The Long Winter: An Introduction to Western Womanhood," *Great Plains Quarterly* 10, no.1 (winter 1990): 37.

12. Some of the characters mentioned appear in Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes* (1833); Johnson Jones Hooper, *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845); and George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood, Yarns* (1867). Many of the stories that came to be called southwestern humor were published in William T. Porter's newspaper *Spirit of the Times*, including one of the genre's best-known stories, Thomas Bangs Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas," which appeared on 17 March 1841. Barely resigned to fictional interlopers such as James Kirke Paulding whose *The Lion of the West* (1830) presented a thinly veiled portrayal of his exploits, the real Davy Crockett responded by producing his own *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* (1834).

13. Rosa Moore, "Laura Ingalls Wilder's Orange Notebooks and the Art of the Little House Books," *Children's Literature* 4 (1975), 114.

14. Bakhtin, "Discourse" (note 5 above), p. 324. Subsequent page references appear in parentheses in the text.

15. Charles Frey, "Laura and Pa: Family and Landscape in *Little House on the Prairie*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (fall 1987): 127.

16. Donald Zochert identifies Dr. Tan as a homeopathic physician in his biography for juvenile readers, *Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: Avon Books, 1997), p. 34.

17. Virginia Wolf, *Little House on the Prairie: A Reader's Companion* (New York: Twayne, 1996), p. 13.

18. Willard H. Rollins, *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), pp. 173-74.

19. James D. Horan, *The McKenney-Hall Portrait Gallery of American Indians* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1972), p. 336; Ron Tyler, *Prints of the West* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), p. 40.

20. Zochert, *Laura* (note 16 above), p. 44; William Anderson, *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 201.

21. It is worth remembering that the character Laura's part in the school exhibition of *Little Town on the Prairie* was to recite all of American history up to the point when "the first wagon wheels rolled into Kansas," a section that would have included the familiar tale of the Pilgrims' isolated settlement saved by a lone friendly Indian, Tisquantum (Squanto).

22. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 65. Subsequent page references appear in parentheses in the text.

23. In *The First Four Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), Laura's final encounter with Native Americans provides a fitting coda to the events in the earlier novels. After her marriage to Almanzo, a group of five men come to her house on the claim, but she, unlike Ma, refuses to offer food despite their requests. When she believes that they will steal her pony, Trixy, Laura runs to the barn and orders the men to leave. In this scene, Laura responds not with restraint but with wildness: her hair flies free from its usual confines for the first time in several of the novels and her "purple eyes [flash] fire" (33) as she slaps the leader who asks her to accompany him. Wilder evokes the earlier scenes from *Little House on the Prairie* as Laura stands watching the men go west on "their running ponies without saddles or bridles" (35). This scene marks an end to Laura's westward travels, however, in a reversal of the earlier scene. Unlike the child Laura, who covets the Indian baby and wants to go west, the adult Laura refuses both to relinquish her pony (the reader recalls the equivalence of horses and children in the series, as when the Boasts offer to exchange their best horse for Laura's child, Rose) and to continue her westward movement.

24. Big Jerry figures even more significantly in the "Pioneer Girl" manuscript, where he metes out a kind of rough class-based justice by subduing an officious eastern timekeeper who tries to hurry along the construction crews building the railroads. As the men grow angry under the timekeeper's "lofty" tones, Big Jerry leads him to the spot where the teamsters dump the loads of earth they have scraped from the grade and keeps him there while loads of dirt cascade over him, spoiling his fine white shirt and collar (George T. Bye Version, from the Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa, pp. 95-96).

25. *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (Essex: Longman, 1992), 17.

26. In "Unflinching Assessment" (note 7 above), Segel comments that "Pa is obviously reluctant to articulate the assumptions of Manifest Destiny, to acknowledge that they underlie his life's decisions as well as the Scotts'" (68) and Janet Spaeth comments that "Pa's reluctance—or inability—to explain

the logic behind Manifest Destiny illustrates his recognition of its inherent difficulties" (*Laura Ingalls Wilder*. [Boston: Twayne, 1987], p. 32).

27. Romines, *Constructing the Little House*, (note 2 above), p. 72.

28. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (1943; reprint. New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 109.

29. Significantly, the "glittering eyes" comment does not appear in Wilder's original autobiographical narrative, "Pioneer Girl" (George T. Bye Version, from the Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa, pp. 2-4).

30. John E. Miller, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman behind the Legend* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), p. 26.

31. In "'Don't Expect to Depend on Anybody Else': The Frontier as Portrayed in the Little House Books," Anita Clair Fellman demonstrates that the Ingalls family left Kansas because "the man who had bought their farm in Wisconsin reneged on the deal and refused to pay the remainder of what he owed them" (*Children's Literature* 26 [1996]: 109).