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THOMPSON'S *AMERICAN DAUGHTER*

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RELIGION, IDEALISM, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE NORTHERN PLAINS ERA BELL THOMPSON'S *AMERICAN DAUGHTER*

KEVIN L. COLE AND LEAH WEINS

In her introduction to *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, Margo Culley writes, "It would be hard to point to a field of contemporary literary studies more vibrant than autobiography studies. Where else does one find a wealth of primary material still mostly unread and unranked?"¹ "Unread and

unranked" aptly describes Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter*, an autobiographical account of an African American woman who comes of age on the plains of North Dakota in the early twentieth century. It is one of those almost forgotten autobiographies that deserves to be read, ranked, and reconsidered, especially in the milieu of Great Plains studies.

American Daughter has never received much attention from the general public and scholars. First published in 1946 by the University of Chicago Press, *American Daughter* initially attracted the attention of writers as prominent as Ralph Ellison, whose review, while not laudatory, was nonetheless admiring.² Despite other favorable reviews and the prestige of the University of Chicago Press, *American Daughter* fell into obscurity. It has been republished only twice since 1946—in 1967 and 1986—and has been the subject of only one extended scholarly discussion.³ The vagaries of *American Daughter*'s publication history should not seal its fate as an insignificant vestige fit only for the archives, however. It deserves to be read, ranked, and included in Great Plains studies if only because it recounts one of the rarest of American experiences:

KEY WORDS: Thompson, Era Bell; African-American autobiography; Great Plains autobiography

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FIG. 1. Era Bell Thompson. Courtesy of University of North Dakota Office of University Relations.

growing up African American on a homestead in the Northern Great Plains in the first two decades of the twentieth century. After all, what besides Oscar Micheaux's *Conquest* comes to mind when one thinks of African American autobiographies of the Northern Great Plains?

In this article we pursue several objectives. We assume that most readers will not have read *American Daughter*, so we first provide a brief summary of it. Second, we discuss the place of *American Daughter* among other African American autobiographies of its time. We then discuss—and offer up a reading of—*American Daughter* by examining Thompson's treatment of religion, an integral element of the work. Specifically, we discuss Thompson's rhetorical strategies as they relate to religion and religious discourse. In the end, we intend to call attention to and renew interest in an overlooked text that, in our opinion, would be of interest and use to scholars and students of the Great Plains.

SUMMARY AND ORIGINS OF *AMERICAN DAUGHTER*

When she wrote *American Daughter*, Thompson was unknown outside of North Dakota, and so it is useful to ask why she would write an autobiography in the first place. Answering this question will provide a brief but useful summary of the book.

In the Great Migration, millions of African Americans migrated from the rural South into the urban centers of the North and Midwest in the early twentieth century. As an adult, Thompson herself would join the Great Migration to Chicago, but what makes her migration there unique is that she migrated from the rural Upper Midwest, not from the South.

Originally from Virginia, Thompson's family was one of a very few African American families who migrated to the Upper Midwest: in their case, to North Dakota in 1914. A passage from *American Daughter*, in which Thompson describes a Christmas gathering, illustrates just how unique they were as African Americans in the Northern Great Plains:

Now there were fifteen us, four percent of the state's entire Negro population. Out there in the middle of nowhere, laughing and talking and thanking God for this new world of freedom and opportunity, there was a feeling of brotherhood, of race consciousness, and of family solidarity. For the last time in my life, I was part of a whole family, and my family was a large part of a little colored world, and for a while no one else existed.⁴

Thompson does not resort to hyperbole. In 1920, just six years after they moved to North Dakota, the general population of the state was 646,872; the black population was 467.⁵

American Daughter opens with the birth of Era Bell in Des Moines in 1906 and her short-lived idyllic childhood there. By the second chapter, her father, Tony, has decided to forsake a comfortable, middle-class existence in Des Moines and follow his half-brother, Gar-

rison (John), who lives on a homestead in North Dakota.⁶ Era Bell is then nine years old. Thompson devotes the majority of *American Daughter* to recounting her childhood and adolescence on the homestead and her young adulthood in Bismarck and Mandan. In the last two chapters, she writes about her college years and her subsequent life in Chicago, where she took various clerical jobs while trying to establish herself as a writer.

Although Thompson understood the uniqueness of her family's experience, she apparently had not considered writing about it until 1945. After graduating from college in 1933, she moved to Chicago. As Kathie Anderson explains, it was not until Thompson applied for a Newberry Fellowship in 1945—to write a book about North Dakota—that she decided to write an autobiography. Recognizing the uniqueness of her experience, the Newberry committee suggested she instead write an autobiography.⁷ The University of Chicago Press published *American Daughter* in 1946.

CONTEXT OF AMERICAN DAUGHTER IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Discussing the place of *American Daughter* among other autobiographies of its time, especially African American autobiographies, would require a separate article. It is worth briefly noting, though, the place of *American Daughter* among African American autobiographies that precede and follow it.

Joanne Braxton contends that *American Daughter* represents the first bold departure from Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in that *American Daughter* is not a work of protest. The most celebrated African American autobiography of the 1940s was—and perhaps still is—*Black Boy*, published in 1945. It established a standard from which few departed over the next few years: using autobiography as a means of protest and as a means to criticize a society that undermined the ambitions and aspirations of African Americans, especially African American men. One thinks, for example, of

The Autobiography of Malcolm X. *American Daughter* instead presents “resilient and self-sufficient individuals rather than victims of culture” and “contains the possibility of personal fulfillment.”⁸ Similarly, *American Daughter* is not fraught with racial tension, and rarely does Thompson engage in political discourse regarding racial matters. When she does, she almost always does so in a humorous, gently satirical manner. Culley points to this unique aspect of *American Daughter*: “For most black women, as for most black men,” she writes, “the foundational category is race,” so much so that “the sign of race seems to override the sign of gender in the titles of black women's autobiographies.” Culley points to *American Daughter* as an exception.⁹

American Daughter also represents a departure from the standard form of autobiographies written by African American women. On the one hand, Braxton explains that the 1940s was a pivotal decade for African American women's autobiography: “Responding to a sense of geographic and cultural displacement,” she writes, “black women gained access to the literary tools of Western culture generally reserved for whites and men and found the writing of autobiography to be refuge of identity.” She lists some of the more noteworthy: Jane Hunter's *A Nickel and a Prayer* (1940), Mary Church Terrell's *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940), Laura Adams's *Dark Symphony* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks* (1942), and Syble Everett's *Adventures with Life: An Autobiography of a Distinguished Negro Citizen* (1945).¹⁰

Even so, Braxton points to Zora Neale Hurston (*Dust Tracks*) and Era Bell Thompson as being the first autobiographers to depart from the conventions that defined the African American autobiographies that precede them:

These women [Thompson and Hurston] represent the first generation of black women autobiographers that did not continually come into contact with former slaves. Their texts reveal a growing sense of

displacement that is geographic, cultural, and social; it is accompanied by a reevaluation and rejection of the traditional female role.¹¹

In fact, Braxton illustrates that both autobiographies "forecast the major literary events that will occur in this tradition for the next two decades." For instance, as a narrative of "isolation and transcendence," *American Daughter* reminds one of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) but also presages works such as Ruby Lee Goodwin's *It's Good to Be Black* (1953) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970).¹²

Finally, *American Daughter* is unique among autobiographies of the "frontier," or what Lynn Z. Bloom calls "twentieth-century Western frontier autobiographies."¹³ Focusing on autobiographies by women, Bloom categorizes these frontier autobiographies as tragicomic, anti-patriarchal, and anti-utopia. She writes: "Twentieth-century women autobiographers of the Western frontier invent themselves as new women in a new land, their utopian visions fulfilled, denied, or met partway."¹⁴ Bloom's categorization is useful in identifying the uniqueness of *American Daughter*, because even though Bloom does not discuss Thompson, it is clear that *American Daughter* falls into none of these categories. If *American Daughter* were to take any label, it would be "coming-of-age autobiography."

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND RHETORICAL STRATEGY

The language of *American Daughter*, rich in religious imagery and allusion, invites readers to read it as a *spiritual* coming-of-age autobiography. The second word of *American Daughter* is "Lord," part of her father's exclamation, "My Lord, it's a girl!" referring to the birth of Era Bell. It would be hyperbole to say that Thompson uses this exclamation to forecast the religious tenor of the work, but in some ways it does, intentionally or not,

given the ubiquitous presence of religion in *American Daughter* and the degree to which religion informs Thompson's rhetorical strategy.

Consider, for instance, Thompson's description of nature and the geography of the Northern Plains. One does not find purple prose but rather an original voice that articulates a religious aesthetic informed by biblical metaphors and allusions. Thompson often refers to God in her description of landscape and geography, commenting specifically on the presence of God below, on, and above the earth. This dimension of her aesthetic emerges in chapter 2, "God's Country." As the following passage indicates, Thompson does not gratuitously or lazily rely on the metaphor:

It was a strange and beautiful country my father had come to, so big and boundless he could look for miles and miles out over the golden prairies and follow the unbroken horizon where the midday blue met the bare peaks of the distant hills. No tree or bush to break the view, miles and miles of grass, acre after acre of waving grain, and up above, God and that fiery chariot which beat remorselessly down upon a parching earth. (23)

Although Thompson presumably would not have subscribed to Emerson's religious—or irreligious—views, she does write in the Emersonian (and Puritan) tradition that associates God with Nature or God as Nature. Readers see this early on in chapter 2 and especially in chapter 3, which is largely about seasonal change in the Northern Plains:

There were still days, silent, hot, motionless days when not a blade of grass stirred, not a stalk of grain moved. You didn't talk much then; you hated to break the prairie silence, the magic of its stillness, for you had that understanding with Nature, that treaty with God. There was no need for words. The silence wore hard on those who did not belong. (50)

In the same vein, Thompson idealizes the labor associated with nature in the Northern Plains by using biblical references and allusions. About shocking grain she writes, "There was something clean and sweet about the harvest, something Biblical about the reaper and the golden sheaves of grain" (58-59). And describing her father's happiness during haying, Thompson writes:

It was a creative thing, this building a stack, rising higher and higher into the sky, above earthly things. He was master of all he surveyed up there, . . . closer to the Golden Stairs. He took Mother with him sometimes, and together they would stand in silence and look away over the prairies. Away over Jordan. (51)

As early as the third chapter, it becomes clear to the reader that for Thompson there is as much religion in the landscape, geography, and the intensive labor required in the Great Plains as there is in the orthodox, conventional environment of a church building:

As fall drew near, the intense heat subsided. There were quiet, silent days when the grainfields were hills of whispering gold, undulating ever so softly in the bated breeze. So warm, so tranquil was the spell that one stretched out on the brown, dry earth, whose dead, tufted prairie grasses made the lying hard, but put even the breeze above you. The sun alone stood between you and the blue sky of your God. (58)

In the presence of such immense geographical solitude and in the absence of a black religious community—a problem we discuss later—one understands how Thompson might have developed this rhetorical strategy.

The discussion thus far might suggest that *American Daughter* is utopian, free of travail, struggle, and deprivation. As we explain later, such is not the case. Thompson recounts everything that was laborious, dreadful, and tragic about living on an isolated homestead

in the Northern Great Plains in the early twentieth century. But she is an optimist and an idealist, who wants to leave readers with the impression that, despite its hardships, the Northern Plains is an idyllic region. As mentioned above, she does so with evocative descriptions of the landscape, replete with religious imagery. But she also portrays the region as idyllic with religious humor, an essential component of her rhetorical strategy. Without it, in fact, *American Daughter* would be a different book.

In chapter 1, when the family is still in Des Moines, Thompson's oldest brother, Hobart (Dick), has a falling out with his father and moves to St. Louis. Hobart fails to make it on his own and returns home shortly. Alluding to the parable of the prodigal son, Thompson establishes this humorous facet of her rhetorical technique:

We didn't kill the fatted calf when Dick returned, but some mighty healthy chickens met an untimely death. . . . Father asked his Sunday blessing, the embodiment of the regular Baptist grace, with deviations and original supplications to fit the occasion. He told the Lord many of the things he couldn't bring himself to tell Dick, and I hope the Lord understood, because Dick wasn't listening. It was his first square meal in two weeks. (18-19)

Before they secure their own homestead, the Thompson family stays with Tony's brother and his family. For a host of reasons, Tony had never liked Garrison's wife, Ada (Anna), namely because she was, as Thompson puts it, "fat and white. Bossy white" (24). Predictably, Tony and Ada have a heated argument, making life in the crowded house unbearable. The argument tries the Christian fortitude of the former deacon and trustee of the Colored Baptist Church in Des Moines. Thompson, who then shared her parents' bedroom, comically recounts Tony's frustration as he talks to his wife: "'Old Brother Satan hisself couldn't get along with that old white woman. Lord, honey,

she's . . . ' Pop's Christianity was making it difficult to find a word. He searched, failed, put his religion aside. 'She's a bitch'" (30).

Even when Thompson is describing times of exceptional travail, she integrates humor, typically religious humor. In the first two years on the homestead, for example, Thompson and her brothers watch their parents struggle and endure poverty, two new and bitter experiences for the children. The boys more than Era Bell grow increasingly cynical of their parents' steadfast faith in God and God's will. Verbally expressing faith in God is central to Tony and Mary's existence. For the boys, it becomes a sign of naiveté, even weakness; their misery and hunger tell them that God does not appear to be at all interested in helping them. Thus, as they watch their parents struggle on a daily basis to produce food for each meal, the children come to look upon strangers looking for a handout—especially those protesting too much religion—with suspicion and cynicism. *American Daughter* reminds readers how common it was for wanderers of all sorts to stop at the loneliest, most isolated homestead and ask for work or a meal. The Thompsons see a steady stream of mendicants and charlatans, many professing to be just "good Christian people" looking for a meal. The children are reluctant to exhibit what their parents insist on exhibiting: Christian charity. Thompson describes one such experience, reminiscent of a Flannery O'Connor short story, that comically illustrates the degree to which the children were justified in their cynicism but also blinded by it.

One evening, Era Bell comes home to find a group of strangers—"a Norwegian couple and a colored missionary woman"—in her parents' house. The effusive religiosity of the three immediately raises the ire of the children and, years later, the gentle satire of Thompson:

They stayed for dinner, a meal freely interspersed with "Amen," "Hallelujahs," and "Word-of-Gods." Hallelujah, coming between bites of boiled pig's feet, was too much

for Dick. He choked and left the table, Tom and Harry following. (37)

Thompson directs most of her humor and satire toward the self-proclaimed missionary:

The missionary woman was a little off the heathen trail, but still preaching the Gospel to all who would listen—and contribute to the price of a railroad ticket towards a warmer land. . . . "All I wants to do, praise God, is to get back to Kansas, hallelujah, and preach the Word, yes, Jesus!" That was her problem. (37)

Readers never learn what happens to the "missionary." But the children misjudge the Olsons, the genuine and generous Norwegian couple who become steadfast friends of the Thompsons.

Another integral element of Thompson's comic, religious rhetorical strategy is denominational humor. She is attuned to and humorously exploits the differences and nuances among Christian denominations in the Northern Plains.¹⁵ Her account of the family's experience at the Nazarenes' Jamestown Holiness Camp illustrates this aspect of *American Daughter*.

Tony, who had formerly been a professional chef in Des Moines, had an enterprising mind and was always searching for ways to earn extra income. In 1917, while on a stint serving as a private messenger for the governor of North Dakota, Tony hears about a two-week Nazarene religious festival held at Jamestown Holiness Camp. Upon returning home, Tony approaches the Nazarenes and proposes that they employ him as their own professional cook for the two-week revival. The Nazarenes agree, giving the young Era Bell her first chance to witness a Nazarene revival. Thompson's approach to integrating religion into the narrative in this chapter is typical of her approach in other chapters: Thompson the adult autobiographer is humorous and satiric, but, recalling the fear and discomfort she felt as a

child, she also integrates the perspective of the child who is confused, intimidated, and frightened by the energy and tenor of fervent religious expression.

For example, Thompson the adult writer is gently satiric:

When we arrived Pop was having trouble with the white folk's religion, again hard put with the "Praise Gods" and the "Hallelujahs." New to him was this taking God over by the fiery stoves or back behind the meat block with the French carvers. . . .

Even Dr. Kane, the great evangelist, invaded the kitchen, slapped Pop's sweating back and said, "Praise the Lord, Tony! Say 'Praise the Lord!'"

"I'm a busy man, Reverend—got to get these folks fed."

"You're not too busy for God, are you, Tony?"

"No. It's not that. Just cookin' and prayin' don't mix."

"You're a Christian, aren't you, Tony?"

"Course I'm a Christian!" Pop bridled.

"You've been born again, haven't you, Tony?"

"Course I've been born again." Sweat rolled down his face.

"Don't you believe," said Dr. Kane, "that you can serve food and serve God at the same time?"

Pop took his big ladle out of the soup and laid it carefully down on the table. "Now what must I do with a man like this?"

Dr. Kane put his arm around Pop's shoulder, put his lips close to Pop's ear. "Say, 'Praise the Lord,' Tony. Say, 'Amen!'"

By the end of the season, my father could stop in the middle of baking a soufflé and say, "Amen." (85-86)

Thompson relates the order of a typical evening revival service with the humorous, satirical perspective of the adult, while gradually integrating the perspective of a child experiencing for the first time a fearful aspect of

low-church Protestantism. For instance, we read that the children first went to "tabernacle classes" where they learned to recite the books of the Bible "for no particular reason." Then the family went to "big tabernacle." Services began with singing, followed by several sermons: "The popular ones prefaced their sermon by telling funny stories, then, gradually, warming up to their subjects, preached and stormed and brought down upon the congregation the wrath, love, and the power of God." At this point, the rhetoric becomes more serious and less satirical as Thompson shifts the perspective to that of the child:

Each preacher made an eloquent plea: the slim ones, pointing gracefully towards heaven, tiptoed around, whispering sweetly, then stopped suddenly, stamped the floor, and shook their clenched fists at the very pits of hell; the fat ones jumped up and down in one spot, their voices going where their bodies could not. (87)

Thompson concludes the section by taking the reader fully into the child's fear:

There was a lot about hell at those meetings. I trembled beside my mother, doomed to eternal fire with the flames of purgatory lapping at my feet, for I was an age now to be responsible for my own soul—and pay full fare on a streetcar. Leaping down from their pulpit, the preachers walked up and down the sawdust aisles, pleading to the congregation. . . . Men and women flocked down to the front of the tent, and knelt in prayer and repentance baring their souls to God. Some stood up and cried and shook hands with the elders, laughing, testifying through their tears; those in a trance were carried off to cots in the rear of the bookstore, where they lay between heaven and hell, fighting with the devil. It was more like Colored Baptist than Colored Baptist, and I came away feeling guilty and afraid. (87-88)

There is a disconcerting sense of displacement in the last sentence; gone is the humor. In terms of religious community, the young Era Bell is twice displaced: from the comfortable, familiar memory of their black religious community in Iowa and now from this white religious community in North Dakota. Braxton recognizes displacement—geographic, racial, and familial—as a central theme of *American Daughter*, but she overlooks the problem of religious displacement, perhaps the most complex aspect of Thompson's coming-of-age autobiography.

Thompson experiences religious displacement in two ways, and when she writes of it, she does so in serious, not comic, terms. On the one hand, she and her family are displaced from the black church.¹⁶ One might refer to this as her "outer" religious life. But she also describes the sense of religious displacement she experiences in her inner religious life, depicting her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood all as periods of religious displacement. As *American Daughter* progresses, readers see the degree to which religious displacement compounds her and her family's sense of geographic and racial displacement.¹⁷ This shifting rhetoric—between the comic and the grave—adds complexity not only to Thompson's treatment of religion and religious concerns but also to the autobiography as a whole.

In Des Moines, Thompson's parents were prominent members in their religious community: "Our Sunday mornings were spent in the Sunday School across the lake," she writes, "but the greater part of the day and much of the night found Trustee Thompson in the center of things religious at Colored Baptist downtown" (15-16). After moving to North Dakota, though, the family stops attending church: there is no black religious community, and they do not feel welcome in the area's white religious communities:

On Sundays Mother and Father walked arm in arm through the pasture to the grain fields to sit on the sunny slopes and dream

and plan for the farm that some day would be ours. We did not go to church, for there was none except the little Lutheran church in Driscoll. It must have been hard for them, my parents, to give up their worship. We still sang the old hymns and said the long prayers over the food, but the boys scoffed at the family Bible reading and grew cynical of Pop's religion, critical of his leadership on the farm. Father felt himself slowly losing his position as head of the house. (48-49)

In fact, the only kind of community they experience with other African Americans—religious or otherwise—occurs during holidays, when the black families of their region would celebrate together.

These celebrations constitute their only black religious community. When Thompson's mother dies in 1918, she and her father eventually move to Bismarck, where they join a church. But Thompson is at best ambivalent about this religious community and what it offers her; she writes very little about it.

The displacement from a black religious community exacerbates the spiritual isolation and displacement the young Thompson experiences as an adolescent, especially between 1918 and 1920. First, as previously mentioned, Thompson's mother, Mary, dies of a stroke in February 1918, when Era Bell is twelve. Second, in the summer of 1919, Thompson experiences what appears to be the most formative and trying summer of her adolescence, if only because her mother is not there to support the family. First, she and her brothers and father have had an especially difficult time coping with Mary's death:

I was glad when school was out, and I could again be with my family and my pets, but home was different now. Over it hung the apparition of my Mother's dreams, the shadow of my Mother's death. Gone from my brothers were the old fun and frivolity, replaced by a cold soberness that drew them farther and farther away from Father, and I

lived between two camps: the one guarded by self-pity and silence, the other by bitter restlessness. (112)

Second, during this mournful period they also experience an exceptionally hot and dry summer: drought conditions and grasshoppers plague their crops; their horses get mange; and two of their best cows and two calves die while wading in mud to escape the heat. Third, Thompson explains that as a child she was worried about World War I and what might happen to her and her country, all of which weighed on her father as well: "Even the two weeks at camp meeting failed to shake Father out of his stolid taciturnity, and the boys became more cynical, more bitter, hating now the land and the loneliness and the futility of fighting against the elements" (113). Finally, in the summer of 1919, race wars broke out in Chicago. Hobart, who lives in Chicago, sends Thompson a copy of the *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper. For the first time she reads about and sees images of the race riots. Worse, for the first time she reads an article about a lynching, sees photographs of the lynching itself and the body that was mutilated, then burned. It is this story that takes her to the depths of her spiritual despair and displacement:

For a long time, I could see the lifeless body dangling from the tree. To me it became a symbol of the South, a place to hate and fear. And Dick's civilization was a riot, where black and white Americans fought each other and died. I wanted never to leave my prairies, with white clouds of peace and clean, blue heavens, for now I knew that beyond the purple hills prejudice rode hard on the heels of promise, and death was its overtaking. And I wondered where was God. (113)

Whether or not Thompson actually wondered "where was God" is beside the point; as an autobiographer, she clearly intends to portray

herself as a young woman enduring physical, emotional, and spiritual despair.

As *American Daughter* progresses from here, readers encounter less humor and more existential, spiritual contemplation. Nevertheless, what impresses the reader is how Thompson, as a young adult, negotiates her growing sense of racial, cultural, and religious displacement with a thick-skinned, idealistic perspective. This negotiation comes to fruition at the end of *American Daughter*.

After graduating from Morningside College in 1933, Thompson moves to Chicago to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. She describes a poignant epiphany that occurs on the street before a storefront church where a black religious community is worshipping:

I had come to be entertained, but there was nothing amusing about these people now. Their blood flowed in my veins, their color, their features were mine, but not their God, for theirs was a faith beyond anything I had ever experienced. . . . When they sang "Holy!" the whole congregation was lifted to its feet. Some held up their hands and screamed, some stood mute, some cried. I sat tense and tight, trapped in the hard shell of my white folks' religion. (258)

Thompson recognizes what historian Albert Raboteau decades later would observe: the black church has played a central role in many African Americans' search for identity and, over the decades, has helped its members adjust to dramatic cultural and economic changes within society.¹⁸ Raboteau's observation would not be particularly useful here if Thompson had not discussed the problem of being isolated from a black religious community. But in this and earlier passages, she portrays herself as a figure of religious displacement; she writes about being separated from the religious community that represents her family's roots and the religious community that would have given her a place to belong to and grow in her faith.

CONCLUSION

Despite the poignant experience at the storefront church in Chicago, Thompson does not conclude *American Daughter* with a sense of disappointment, despair, and regret. She cannot; her demeanor and character have been tempered by the obdurate and unforgiving Northern Great Plains. Thompson is tough, undaunted by the specter of despair, and driven by an unyielding, infectious optimism.

This toughness and optimism undoubtedly helped Thompson forge an impressive career after the publication of *American Daughter*. In the same year, she took a position with Johnson Publishing Company, publisher of, among other things, the new magazine *Ebony*, for which she was associate editor from 1947 to 1951 and co-managing editor from 1951 to 1964. In 1964 she became international editor for the Johnson Publishing Company, a post she held, even in semiretirement, until her death. In her years with Johnson Publishing, Thompson interviewed and wrote about figures prominent in American culture, published on a wide array of topics, and traveled widely. For instance, her second book, *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, published in 1954, was a memoir about her travels throughout eighteen African countries. With fellow *Ebony* editor Herbert Nipson, she published *White on Black: The Views of Twenty-Two White Americans on the Negro* in 1963, an eclectic collection of essays by people ranging from William Faulkner to Jack Dempsey. In August of the same year, she covered Martin Luther King Jr.'s momentous "I Have a Dream Speech" in Washington, D.C. And in 1964 she published an article about cancer and her own radical mastectomy. Thompson remained in Chicago for the rest of her life, traveling frequently abroad and in the United States, making frequent trips to North Dakota. North Dakota has not been reticent in recognizing Thompson's achievements. In 1969 the University of North Dakota awarded her an honorary doctorate, and in 1979 the university changed the name of its Black Cultural Center to the

Era Bell Thompson Cultural Center. In 1976 Thompson received the Roughrider Award, the highest award given by the state of North Dakota. Portraits of the Roughrider recipients hang in the capitol building in Bismarck. Thompson died in 1986.¹⁹

In the last chapter, "My America," Thompson articulates an idealistic vision of "her America": a harmonious America, an America that will someday bridge the gulf that separates races, an America where anyone can forge an identity and develop a sense of belonging:

I know there is still good in the world, that way down underneath, most Americans are fair; that my people and your people can work together and live together in peace and happiness, if they have the opportunity to know and understand each other.

The chasm is growing narrower. When it closes, my feet will rest on a united America. (296)

The concluding passage calls to mind Culley's observation that, for many women, the act of writing autobiography is "ultimately an act of community building."²⁰ In "My America," and arguably throughout *American Daughter*, this is exactly what Thompson is doing: building a community upon the vestiges of her unique American experience.

NOTES

1. Margo Culley, ed., *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 3.

2. Ralph Ellison, "Stepchild Fantasy," review of *American Daughter*, by Era Bell Thompson, *Saturday Review of Literature* 29 (June 1946): 25.

3. See Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 144-80.

4. Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (1946; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), p. 74. Further citations to *American Daughter* are given in parentheses in the text.

5. A decade earlier, the U.S. Census indicates that in 1910, the general population of North Dakota was 577,056; the black population was 61.

See *United States Census Data Browser*, retrieved 7 March 2003, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>.

6. Thompson uses her mother's and father's real names. Presumably to protect identities, she uses fictitious names for other family members and friends of the family. We use the family member's true name, and at the first mention include the fictitious name in parentheses. According to Thompson, Garrison convinced his brother that North Dakota held more opportunity for their children because there was less racial prejudice. Era Bell Thompson, interviewed by Larry Sprunk, North Dakota Oral History Project, Bismarck, N. Dak., 16 September 1975.

7. See Kathie R. Anderson, "Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter," in *The Centennial Anthology of North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains*, ed. Janet Daley Lysengen and Ann M. Rathke (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1996), pp. 307-19.

8. Braxton, *Black Women Writing* (note 3 above), pp. 149, 159.

9. Culley, *American Women's Autobiography* (note 1 above), p. 8.

10. Braxton, *Black Women Writing* (note 3 above), pp. 139-49.

11. Braxton, *ibid.*, p. 144.

12. Braxton, *ibid.*, pp. 146; 158-59.

13. See Lynn Z. Bloom, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Twentieth-Century Women's Frontier Auto-

biographies," in *American Women's Autobiography* (note 1 above), p. 128.

14. Bloom, *ibid.*

15. Several of Thompson's accounts speak to and reflect denominational history, such as the spread of the Holiness Movement in the early twentieth century.

16. We use the term "black church" as it is used in scholarship: a religious body of Christians consisting primarily of African Americans.

17. On the relationship between identity and the black church, Albert Raboteau writes, "By conserving traditional religious culture, black churches gave black communities and individuals a significant sense of continuity with the past. By evoking familiar religious symbols to interpret novel circumstances, black pastors helped their people to accommodate disruptions caused by rapid change. See Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 105. *American Daughter* is the story of someone who was "robbed" of this community.

18. Raboteau, *ibid.*, p. 116.

19. Biographical information is taken from Anderson, "Era Bell Thompson" (note 12 above), pp. 316-19.

20. Culley, *American Women's Autobiography* (note 1 above), p. 10.