

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2004

"This Strange White World" Race And Place In Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter*

Michael K. Johnson

University of Maine at Farmington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Johnson, Michael K., "'This Strange White World' Race And Place In Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter*" (2004). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2452.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2452>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

“THIS STRANGE WHITE WORLD”

RACE AND PLACE IN ERA BELL THOMPSON’S AMERICAN DAUGHTER

MICHAEL K. JOHNSON

Aboard a train heading out of Minneapolis toward frontier North Dakota, Era Bell Thompson in her autobiography *American Daughter* (1946) describes a landscape that grows steadily bleaker with each mile farther west: “Suddenly there was snow—miles and miles of dull, white snow, stretching out to meet the heavy, gray sky; deep banks of snow drifted against wooden snow fences. . . . All day long we rode through the silent fields of

snow, a cold depression spreading over us.” Thompson’s realistic winter landscape descriptions also allegorically represent the social situation of herself and her family. The phrase “this strange white world,” which she uses to describe the view from the train window, refers to both natural and social environments. “Aren’t there any colored people here?” her mother asks. “Lord, no!” responds her father, who has preceded the family to North Dakota. As the only black child in her school, Thompson soon discovers the difficulty of her situation in this strange white world: “When they . . . called me ‘black’ and ‘nigger’ . . . I was alone in my exile, differentiated by the color of my skin, and I longed to be home with the comfort of my family; but even with them I would not share my hurt. I was ashamed that others should find me distasteful.”¹

In *American Daughter*, the changed appearance of the physical world signals the crossing of the border from such settled and urban areas as Minneapolis to a frontier space recently opened for homesteading, and from a sense of belonging to an African American community to a sense of “exile” in a predominately white western settlement. Richard Slotkin

KEY WORDS: African American literature, Era Bell Thompson, frontier literature, North Dakota

Michael K. Johnson is an Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Maine at Farmington. His book *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* was recently published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

[GPQ 24 (Spring 2004): 101-11]

argues that frontier narratives emphasize an opposition between "the frontier" and "civilization," or the "wilderness" and the "metropolis," that often falls along a geographical divide between the wild, unsettled American West and the urban East.² Thompson revises this traditional opposition of frontier literature—the essential difference between the wilderness and the metropolis—to symbolize what W. E. B. Du Bois describes as "double-consciousness," the psychological tension and turmoil the African American individual experiences as he or she attempts to maintain a sense of belonging to two worlds, one black, one white.³ Gerald Early comments that Du Bois "saw blacks as being caught, Hamlet-like, between" the choice of living as "an assimilated American" or as "an unassimilated Negro."⁴ In *American Daughter*, the metropolis represents the black world, the place of African American community and culture. Moving west to the frontier means assimilating into mainstream society, separating from the black community, and becoming part of a strange white world.

Although the role of black Americans in settling the West has not always been adequately acknowledged, contemporary historians are rapidly filling in the details of African American contributions to westward expansion—from the work of black soldiers and cowboys to the community-building efforts of groups of black settlers. According to Quintard Taylor, census data reveal that black cowboys had a widespread presence in the American West. In the late nineteenth century, the Exodusters became part of a wave of black migration that helped settle Kansas. When the Oklahoma Territory opened to settlement in 1889, "an estimated 10,000 blacks" were among the "Sooners" who raced to stake claims.⁵ Several African American writers who experienced frontier life firsthand have set down those experiences in autobiographies or fictionalized accounts of their own stories. As does Thompson's autobiography, these accounts primarily tell the stories of African

American individuals or of single black families living as part of predominately white frontier communities. Nat Love's autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick"* (1907), recounts highlights of his career as a black cowboy in what he calls the "Wild and Woolly West." Oscar Micheaux (better known as the pioneering black filmmaker who began his career making all-black-cast silent movies) wrote several novels, including *The Conquest* (1913) and *The Homesteader* (1917), based on his own experiences as a farmer and homesteader in South Dakota. We also might note Montana-born Taylor Gordon, whose entertaining autobiography *Born to Be* (1929) begins in his hometown of White Sulphur Springs (where, he writes, "If God ever did spend any time here on earth, that must have been His hang-out, for every little thing that's natural and beautiful to live with is around White Sulphur") and follows his adventures as he travels around the country by train as the private porter for circus impresario John Ringling.⁶

As do the narratives of Micheaux and Gordon, *American Daughter* describes a sense of restless movement, with Thompson sometimes shuttling back and forth between her frontier home and urban black communities as her race-based and place-based senses of self repeatedly diverge, conflict, and intersect. Although Thompson shares with Micheaux and Gordon an understanding that descriptions of place can serve an allegorical purpose (as indicated by her use of the wilderness/metropolis opposition as a metaphor for double-consciousness), she balances that allegorical approach with naturalistic and poetic descriptions of a prairie landscape that she observes closely and comes to appreciate for its variety and beauty.

DESCRIBING THE PRAIRIE

Era Bell Thompson ends up in North Dakota when her father, concerned about his sons' futures, observes, "[W]e'd better take the boys

to Dakota. . . . They need to grow and develop, live where there's less prejudice and more opportunity" (21). The Dakota frontier represents for Tony Thompson an opportunity unavailable in the civilized East with its system of legal and social segregation. "Nothin' for colored boys to get in this town," Tony states, "but porter work, washin' spittoons" (21). Inspired by his half-brother John, who writes to him praising "the boundless prairies" as a "new land of plenty where a man's fortune was measured by the number of his sons, and a farm could be had even without money," Tony strikes out "for far-off North Dakota to find a new home in the wide open spaces, where there was freedom and equal opportunity for a man with three sons. Three sons and a daughter" (18, 22). As "a daughter," Thompson is barely an afterthought in her father's plans of freedom and equal opportunity—and is certainly inadequate as a measure of his success. For the first third of the story, Thompson almost seems an afterthought in her own narrative as she downplays her own actions in favor of reporting the successes and failures of her father and brothers Tom, Dick, and Harry. Her witness-participant persona, however, enables an objective and often ironic commentary on the men's wilderness-taming efforts.

The Thompsons eventually sign a tenant lease on the "old Hansmeyer place," a homestead that comes with a house, barn, land, and a pair of horses, let loose on the prairie. Those horses immediately capture her father's imagination: "Them's the wildest tame horses I ever see. But ain't no horse livin' I can't handle. No, sirree. Ain't no horse livin'" (39-40). As Tony is seduced by the sight of the wild horses, he is also taken in by Hansmeyer's sales pitch about the "hidden possibilities of the soil (hidden two feet under the snow)" (39). When the snow melts, the family discovers beneath the snow not possibilities but "rocks, millions of rocks pimpling the drab prairie: large blue-gray boulders . . . long, narrow slits of rocks surfacing the soil like huge cetacean monsters" (41). The horses prove as troublesome as the

rocky ground. After the spring thaw, the men (with much effort) succeed in luring the horses into the barn. While Tom follows them inside, the no longer boastful Tony takes "a safe position outside the barn window—club in hand" (42). From inside the barn "came a high shrill whinny, the thudding sound of bodies, splintering stalls. The old barn moved ominously" (43). Eventually, with the help of a neighbor (Gus, a Norwegian immigrant bachelor with a fondness for whiskey), Tom gets the horses hitched to a wagon. Leaping forward from the barn, "the horses made a new gate through the yard fence and tore down the muddy road on a dead gallop, as Gus sat waving his bottle and yelling in Norwegian" (43). Two hours later, Tom guides the exhausted horses home: "The buggy was a shambles, Gus was stone sober, but we had a team" (43). Tom tames the horses, but only temporarily, as Tony continues to have trouble with them. Although he drives the team into town one day without mishap, the horses return an hour later "on a dead run, heads up, heels flying, a picture of rhythmic beauty. Turning in the gate on two wheels, they stopped only when the buggy lodged in the barn door. Pop and one seat were missing" (44).

As her brothers take to the tasks of taming the horses, plowing the fields, and "dodging the rocks," the nine-year-old Thompson enviously watches "the shining shares slide along beneath the stubborn sod, turning over long rows of damp, blackish earth like unending dusky curls" (46-47). Excluded by age and gender from plowing, Thompson begins to develop a different relationship with the prairie than her father and brothers do. Once the initial shock of the North Dakota winter passes, Thompson indicates a growing sense of appreciation for the natural world around her:

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 God. (58)

If bleak winter landscape descriptions reflect Thompson's sense of "exile, differentiated by the color of my skin," she nonetheless establishes a sense of belonging to this world. She does not make the land into home by trying to transform it (as do her father and brothers) but rather by reshaping her vision of her self in relation to the world. She does not dominate the land so much as place herself within it, "stretched out on the brown, dry earth." According to Joanne Braxton, Thompson achieves a sense of "perceptual unity with nature."⁷ In Thompson's landscapes, prairie, sun, sky, and individual each exist in close relation to the other.

We might compare Thompson's perspective on landscape to that of Oscar Micheaux, who similarly tells of an early-twentieth-century African American pioneer trying to establish a prairie farm. In his novel *The Homesteader*, Micheaux writes that his protagonist, Jean Baptiste, came to South Dakota "because he felt it was the place for young manhood," and because "here with the unbroken prairie all about him; with its virgin soil and undeveloped resources . . . here could a young man work out his own destiny." Writing in the social context of early-twentieth-century prejudice, Micheaux uses Baptiste's transformation of a wild place into a profitable enterprise to symbolize what African Americans in general can accomplish in a world of equal opportunity. His landscape descriptions are shaped by that purpose, so much so that he shows little interest in the prairie's natural beauty. Rather, he emphasizes storms, fires, droughts—natural obstacles to success that Baptiste overcomes through the quality of his character and his admirable work ethic. Whereas Thompson comes to appreciate the prairie in and of itself, Micheaux's Jean Baptiste most appreciates a prairie transformed: "[H]e gazed out over a

stretch of land which two years before, had been a mass of unbroken prairie, but was now a world of shocked grain." In Baptiste's eyes, "no crops are like the crop on new land," and the land itself "seemed to appreciate the change, and the countless shocks before him were evidence to the fact." Baptiste does not stretch "out on the brown, dry earth," but rather he "gaze[s] over" it, establishing himself in a position of visual dominance rather than perceptual unity.⁸

Thompson's descriptions often take the form of a catalogue of the flora and fauna of the prairie that emphasizes a naturalist's eye for detail and a poet's sensibility. "The tumbling tumbleweeds," writes Thompson, "heralded the coming of winter. Huge Russian thistles, ugly and brittle now, free of their moorings, rolled across the prairie like silent, gray ghosts, catching in fence corners, piling up in low places, herded and driven mercilessly by the cold wind that whistled down from the far North" (66). As does Micheaux, Thompson is attentive to planted fields as well as undisturbed prairie, but her descriptions emphasize beauty over bounty. If "a world of shocked grain" represents financial success for Micheaux, Thompson finds that there is "something clean and sweet about the harvest," discovers that there is "an art in shocking grain" (58-59). Even her descriptions of crop failure recognize the beauty in a natural process that begins with the transformation of a "stubbornly" green "twenty-acre strip of flax" into a "whole field burst into delicate blue flowers, miniature stars against the yellow mustard blooms" and ends when "the blue flowers disappeared as quickly as they had come, and tiny bulbs of seed began to form in their place, to brown and ripen too quickly in the searing wind" (50).

As Annette Kolodny suggests, male writers who describe the American landscape often use the figure of "virgin" terrain that "apparently invites sexual assertion and awaits impregnation."⁹ Through references to the prairie's "virgin soil and undeveloped resources" and to the "virgin soil [that] had been

opened to the settler" (to name just two examples), Micheaux follows this pattern by implicitly sexualizing the landscape.¹⁰ Other male writers indulge in a more explicitly sexual relationship through descriptions of physically merging with or penetrating the land. Although sensual, Thompson's landscape descriptions are not allegorical representations of the earth as a female body to be taken, opened, possessed, penetrated, or dominated. Although she may animate her landscapes (they "whisper" and "undulate"), she does not overtly sexualize them, nor does she penetrate or physically merge with the environment. Though "stretched out on the brown, dry earth," she observes that the "prairie grasses made the lying hard," a description that emphasizes both close proximity and distinct physical separation of the individual and the environment (58). Returning from delivering a load of grain, she observes, "[S]ometimes I sat silently on the high seat or stood down in the bottom of the deep wagon . . . watching gold-streaked heavens turn blue with approaching night" (101). Thompson's landscape descriptions pointedly include her presence as part of the depicted scene. Although she does not establish a dominating gaze that inscribes a hierarchical relationship between observer and observed, she nonetheless maintains a distinct sense of boundaries between self and other. By describing her position within the scene as the observer "on the high seat" or "in the bottom" of the wagon, she implies both perceptual unity with and physical separation from the scene under observation.

Although her landscapes do not connote the female body, she does connect the prairie to her mother. That connection is emotional rather than physical, for she increasingly turns to the prairie for the sort of comfort—especially in terms of salving the consciousness wounded by prejudice—and restored sense of wholeness that her mother provides earlier in the autobiography. During her first day at the Driscoll school, she is subjected to the intrusive curiosity of the other children: "One of Sue's friends put her arm around me and felt of

my hair; Tillie stared at the white palms of my hands, and I closed my fists tight until they hurt. For the first time I began to wonder about that and about the soles of my feet" (33). When she returns home, she discovers her mother waiting. She "clasped me in her arms, hugging me as though she had never expected to see me again, and I soon forgot about the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands" (33). Later in the narrative, she turns for such forgetfulness to the natural world, or she loses herself in the rhythm of farm chores: "With my dog and my pony I was happy beyond the realm of people, for I had found a friendship among animals that wavered not, that asked so little and gave so much of loyalty and trust, irrespective of color" (84). "The coming-home on a load of hay in the warm silence of twilight," Thompson writes, "had a sacredness about it that filled us with the inner happiness that comes of a day's work well done" (52). The prairie becomes a place of peace and healing that supplements or substitutes for her family.¹¹

Repeated throughout her landscape descriptions are references to beauty, tranquility, silence, and peace, but also to solitude and loneliness. Alone with a horse and wagon, Thompson describes the experience of hauling grain to the elevator: "I loved the long, solitary ride through the golden autumn sunshine . . . when the days stood still and the warm silence was unbearable in its poignant beauty" (100). Although the prairie represents healing, her moments of experiencing a sense of wholeness are most often achieved at the cost of separation from the social world. "Of all the family, I alone was happy on our land, content to call it home," Thompson writes, but that happiness in solitude mirrors the sense of social isolation she often feels in her predominately white community (111). Thompson's landscape descriptions encode a seemingly contradictory sense of both isolation from and unity with her surroundings that points to the central question of the narrative: how does one establish a sense of natural wholeness and unity as part of a social world divided by race?

DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE
WILDERNESS/METROPOLIS OPPOSITION

For W. E. B. Du Bois, the question of how to achieve a sense of whole self in an America divided by the color line is the central dilemma of African American experience.¹² Thompson's unique contribution both to the literature of the frontier and to African American literature is her clever joining of the central oppositions of each body of literature, using frontier literature's wilderness/metropolis opposition as a metaphor for double-consciousness. The metropolis for Thompson represents African American culture and identity, and the wilderness (prairie) represents assimilation into the predominately white world of the American mainstream. Although Thompson ultimately tries to overcome these oppositions, others in the book try to resolve their sense of double-consciousness by severing their connection to the black East. In response to her mother's curiosity about other black people in the area, Thompson's uncle John states, "What'd you want with colored folks, Mary? Didn't you come up here to get away from 'em? Me, I could do without 'em for the rest of my days" (27-8). In the mythology of the frontier, life on the frontier is always better than in "civilization," and for Thompson's uncle John, assimilation in the frontier community is preferable to an unassimilated life among black people in the metropolis.

Others indicate less certainty than John does. As Early observes, for Du Bois, "To be an assimilated American and to be an unassimilated Negro were both real and, more importantly, equally or near equally appealing choices," and many of the characters we meet in *American Daughter* address the difficulty of that choice.¹³ Ed Smith, an African American man whom Tony Thompson rooms with while he is working in Bismarck, exemplifies this dilemma. In Bismarck, he operates a successful pawnshop, but he acknowledges his wife's loneliness: "[S]he hasn't got anybody to associate with but white folks. Oh, they're nice enough, treat us fine and all that, but they're

not colored, see" (80). The African American, writes Du Bois, "ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings."¹⁴ With the birth of their son, the Smiths find themselves similarly divided. They "don't want to bring the kid up ignorant about his own people," but at the same time they "don't want him to learn how to run from white folks" (80). As Ed states, "I was bred and born in the South, lived there most of my life, but I don't want my son to be brought up there either" (80).

Thompson's brother Dick, who abandons the farming enterprise early in the story, makes a different choice and migrates eastward to the city as soon as he's old enough to leave the family. In a letter, he asks, "How . . . can you folks stay out there in that Godforsaken country away from civilization and our people?" (113) Dick also sends a copy of the *Chicago Defender*, "the first Negro newspaper I had ever seen" (113). While the newspaper represents part of Thompson's education in African American culture, it also reminds her of the problems blacks face back in "civilization"—through a story on lynching and a photograph of a hanging. "The lifeless body dangling from the tree," writes Thompson, "became a symbol of the South" and of "Dick's civilization," a place where "black and white Americans fought each other and died" (113). Through the stories of individual family members and neighbors, Thompson describes the different responses and psychological adjustments of these pioneers who have left behind black communities to become part of a strange white frontier world—a world that offers greater opportunity for landownership, less (but not a complete lack of) racism, a degree of safety from the antiblack violence erupting throughout much of early-twentieth-century America, and escape from the corrupt Jim Crow culture of segregation and second-class citizenship. That escape, however, comes at the cost of separation from African American culture and community. Forced to make a choice, which is preferable? Remaining isolated from "our people" in the relative safety of the frontier,

or risking the dangers of antiblack violence in the civilized metropolis?

Just before Christmas, the family experiences their first blizzard, and Thompson describes the storm closing in and "forming a blurry whiteness" (69). Even within the whiteness of the storm, the family recreates a sense of belonging to the black world left behind when several African American families get together to celebrate Christmas:

Now there were fifteen of 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. (74)

The physical distance between the urban black world and the predominately white frontier community exaggerates the dilemma of double-consciousness, but the Thompson family is able to find "a little colored world" within the surrounding blurry whiteness and maintain a feeling of "race consciousness" and a sense of solidarity with black friends and family that contributes to their ability to transform this new world into "home." Although many frontier narratives maintain an essential difference between civilization and wilderness, *American Daughter* undermines that distinction by recreating a sense of the urban black community on the Dakota frontier.

Transforming North Dakota from a strange white world into home involves not only adjusting to the new natural environment but also connecting with other families—white and black—in order to create an integrated community. At the Christmas celebration, "two white families stopped by to extend their greetings. The spell of color was broken, but not the spirit of Christmas, for the way Mack greeted them and their own warm response

erased any feeling we may have had of intrusion" (74). Thompson complicates her initial image of the "white world" by acknowledging that her frontier community is multiethnic if not multiracial. The establishment of an integrated community involves friendships established between the Thompsons and other neighbors—primarily European and Scandinavian immigrants. A German neighbor, seeing that the Thompsons are in desperate straits, buys them sacks of food: "Nein, nein! I no vant money. Ven you git it you pay me, if you vant. I got money, I your neighbor, I help you. Dot iss all" (55). Integration for Thompson does not mean assimilation—losing one's black identity by merging completely with the surrounding white world—but involves rather a mixing of cultural elements, as symbolized in one example by her brothers developing their own patois, which they dub "Negrowegian" (82). Although Driscoll, North Dakota, is no utopian space free from racial prejudice, Thompson consistently (if temporarily) locates here and elsewhere the possibility of integrated communities that represent her vision of what America should be.

Feelings of "at-home-ness" are fleeting, however, and the wholeness of the "little colored world" enjoyed at Christmas fragments with the untimely death of Thompson's mother the following February. The family begins to break apart as one by one her brothers abandon the farm, leaving only Thompson and her father, who walked around "in a halo of grief, whistling or humming the old hymns" (97). Braxton observes that Mary Thompson symbolizes Era Bell's "connection with the primary source of [her] black and female identity."¹⁵ Her mother's death begins a process whereby Thompson becomes more and more alienated from the black world which she feels so much a part of at Christmas. Although the prairie landscape she turns to for comfort may substitute as a source of maternal and female identity, the land does not provide that same sense of connection to black identity. The loss of her mother—and the connection to black identity she symbolizes—initiates

a search both for self and for a lost home, a physical and psychological space representative of wholeness rather than two-ness. The prairie that Thompson loves, with its "white clouds of peace and clean, blue heavens," cannot overcome the pull she feels to learn more about the black world of the East (113).

After his wife's death, and after his sons leave, Tony abandons farming to move farther west to Mandan, North Dakota, where the mountain time zone and "the real West" begin (145). At this midpoint in her autobiography, Thompson's story becomes a narrative of education and of discovery of a voice—as symbolized by her developing career as a writer. As her father moves west, she travels in the opposite direction seeking the "land of my people," where she secures a summer job with the Smiths in St. Paul and begins to explore "the world of colored girls and boys . . . of colored stores and churches" (159). Her people, resentful that an outsider has taken one of the few available white-collar jobs for African Americans, do not accept her with open arms, and by summer's end, "I was glad to leave . . . glad to get away from grocery stores and restaurants and rows of colored houses and colored people's gates—gates where I was still a stranger—and colored boys and girls who did not want me" (164). Thompson's effort to resolve her sense of double-consciousness is reflected after her mother's death by the narrative's restless movements back and forth. "I wondered what it was I had sought to escape," Thompson writes, "running back and forth from prairie to city" (198). In each move, she finds herself located either in white or black worlds—or uneasily negotiating the space between the two. At the same time that she loves the silence of the prairie, she also loves the voice that she discovers in her journeys to the city. To be on the prairie is to be comforted and healed, but it is also to be silent and alone.

Rejected by the black community of St. Paul, she turns her attention to another strange white world—as one of the few African American students at the University of North Da-

kota. Thompson inherits the ability to survive in this and other environments from her father, who emerges as someone who flourishes when asked to bring together black and white social worlds. After taking over a furniture store in Mandan, he and Era Bell set up in a new house that is separated from their neighbors, the Harmons, by "a high fence" through which "four little boys fretted" and "tried to make friends through the cracks. Mrs. Harmon didn't approve of Negroes for neighbors" and spends her day "watching from behind her starched curtains" (137). Thompson writes:

Pop was irked by the constant watching, and he felt sorry for the little boys jailed in behind the fence, so gradually he began to break the lady down. Every morning he'd come outside by the kitchen window and bow politely to the starched curtains and say good morning to the kids. His whistling about the yard and garden drew them to the fence like a magnet. He talked to them as he worked, apparently unmindful of the woman's watching eyes. Little by little the curtains began to part, slowly Mrs. Harmon began to nod, then smile. It wasn't long before she came out on her back porch to sit and listen to what Pop said to her boys, before the little boys were slipping over the fence and into our yard. (138)

Not all walls that separate black and white are so easily breached, and we have plenty of examples in the book of people whose prejudice is able to withstand even the considerable Thompson charm. Nonetheless, Thompson's father provides her with strategies for surviving in the white world that she must negotiate to earn her college degree. His talent for creating friendships across ethnic and racial boundaries is one that Thompson will develop as well.

Following her mother's death, Thompson establishes a series of relationships with girls and young women of different ethnic groups, and it is from these friendships that she begins to reestablish a sense of female identity and

community. After her father abandons the farm, the two live in several North Dakota towns where Thompson finds a wider sampling of ethnicities than in the farming community of Driscoll. Her new community includes Russian German friends who live in neighborhoods where "English was seldom spoken," as well as her Sioux friend Priscilla Running Horse whose non-English-speaking mother, Thompson observes, was likewise "Old Country," except that "it wasn't Old Country: it was this country" (145-47). In Bismarck, she befriends the Jewish Sarah Cohn, and the two "became inseparable" (127). Together, they wander "into enemy territory, neighborhoods where the kids called us names; but if they called me a coon, they called her a kike, and when I was with her there was none of the embarrassment I felt when I was with my other friends" (128). As a student at the University of North Dakota, she takes up residence with the adventurous Opal Block in the Jewish section of Grand Rapids, where she adds Yiddish to her "strange vocabulary" of Norwegian, German, and English, and where she develops "a taste for lokshen and kosher fleish" (174). Through female friendships, Thompson creates a multiethnic social community whose members transgress the official and physical boundaries that segregate groups of people within distinct areas of space—the German neighborhood, the Jewish section, the Indian school.

She begins to experience through these social relations a sense of unity and comfort similar to that found earlier in her solitary sojourns on the prairie, but her task remains to find a way to bring together her experiences of the social and natural worlds—and to connect both to an African American community that seems increasingly distant. Although Thompson enjoys a degree of social mobility as an individual, that mobility does not exist for the majority of African Americans who remain confined by the physical patterns of segregation. Her task is made more difficult with the death of her father, which also symbolizes the severing of the final familial con-

nection to the western landscape: "Between two deaths I stood at prairie eventide; the last symbol of family lay lifeless at my feet. Gone, too, were the bonds and obligations, and in their stead a bereftness, a desolate freedom. My life was my own choosing, and there could be no more coming home" (201). After her father's death, her explorations take her farther east, and the narrative emphasis turns to a search for a place in the world of the metropolis.

Thompson eventually finds a place in the home of a white family, the Rileys, who help sponsor her attendance at Morningside College in Iowa. Although she is happy and comfortable within both the Riley family and the Morningside College community, after graduation Thompson moves to Chicago "seeking work and a home among my people" (249). Although her "new home was ideal," her African American landlord and landlady "didn't like white people," and when she brings her white friend Silver to visit, "we were met with a cold, hostile silence" (267). Individual efforts to create an integrated society of close friends are made difficult by the larger divisions of the social world, and her Chicago experience—rather than resolving her sense of double-consciousness—leaves her "feeling that I was fighting the world alone, standing in a broad chasm between the two races, belonging to neither one" (268). In segregated Chicago, she also finds herself under tighter economic and social restrictions than she had experienced while under the protective care of white friends in North Dakota and Iowa. When the Rileys come to visit, "for a while I was back in the boundless white world, where all gates were open, all the fences down. . . . It was a temptation to go home with the Rileys, but I chose to stay in my new black world, feeling that somewhere I would find a happy side, that between the white and the black there must be a common ground" (255).

That wished-for common ground is sometimes found. When visited by her white friend Gwyn, Thompson takes her to a "shady knoll in Washington Park, where we could sit on

the cool grass and talk, where, under the pure blue sky and the whispering trees, no shadow of race would come between us" (268). Natural space operates as both the figurative opposite of the urban metropolis and as a possible point of mediation between the black and white social worlds that split Thompson's allegiance. Thompson occasionally finds in such natural spaces as the park momentary integrated "homes" that exist in contrast to the segregated social spaces we see in the book. As Braxton observes, "Chicago's 'pure blue sky' brings back Era Bell's childhood sense of wholeness symbolized by her perceptual unity with nature and the blue skies of her North Dakota girlhood."¹⁶ In contrast to those earlier moments of unity with nature, Thompson shares this moment with another. If Thompson figures double-consciousness through her twin desires to find a sense of unity in both the natural world of the prairie and the social world of the metropolis, the park, which exists within urban Chicago, represents the interrelationship of both those worlds. The "whispering trees" recall the whispering grain fields of the prairie. That the same "pure blue sky" exists above both Chicago and North Dakota posits the two not as opposing terms but rather as part of the same continuum of experience. Thompson realizes that she must rethink the separation of natural space from social space, must overturn the frontier narrative's metropolis/wilderness opposition in order to be able to create for herself places of healing, comfort, and integration—in order to create "home" in other environments.

In the final chapter, Thompson narrates a trip by bus across America. Through her travels, she claims a place in all parts of America. Thompson herself becomes a figure who links different regions (North, South, East, West) and seemingly opposed social worlds. Thompson resists seeing the city and the frontier as essential markers of difference, as inferior and superior places; neither does she lift one social world, black or white, over the other—for she calls both regions and both communities home. Still, she realizes that she alone cannot close

the social gap, that the resolution to two-ness ultimately involves social forces larger than the self. She concludes with the comment, "The chasm is growing narrower. When it closes, my feet will rest on a united America" (296). Although *American Daughter* registers a pattern of location and dislocation, of finding home, of being in exile, Thompson never abandons her effort to resolve double-consciousness by establishing, even if tenuously, a sense of home and of belonging in both the city and the prairie, in both the black and the white worlds.

NOTES

1. Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (1946; St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 26-27, 83-84. Subsequent references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.

2. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (1985; New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).

3. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Penguin, 1989), 5.

4. Gerald Early, introduction to *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Penguin, 1993), xx.

5. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: Norton, 1998), 158; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (1976; New York: Norton, 1986); William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (1987; New York: Touchstone, 1996), 248.

6. Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* (1907; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995); Oscar Micheaux, *The Conquest* (1913; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Oscar Micheaux, *The Homesteader* (1917; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); Taylor Gordon, *Born to Be* (1929; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 4.

7. Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 162.

8. Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, 24, 131.

9. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 67.

10. Micheaux, *The Homesteader*, 24, 109.

11. Kevin L. Cole and Leah Weins usefully place *American Daughter* in the context of the genre of the spiritual autobiography, and they observe that while criticism on the book has recognized the thematic centrality of displacement, overlooked has been "the problem of religious displacement, perhaps the most complex aspect of Thompson's coming-of-age autobiography" (226). Cole and Weins point out that Thompson's use of religious language in her landscape descriptions can be interpreted as a "rhetorical strategy" that figures "the absence of a black religious community" in North Dakota (223). Viewed from the perspective established by Cole and Weins, Thompson's application of religious language ("sacredness") to her descriptions of experiences in nature might suggest that the prairie supplements or substitutes for not only her family but also that absent black religious

community. Kevin L. Cole and Leah Weins, "Religion, Idealism, and African American Autobiography in the Northern Plains: Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 23 (Fall 2003): 219-29.

12. "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century," writes Du Bois, who continues, "This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth-Century is the problem of the color-line." Du Bois, *Souls*, 1.

13. Early, *Lure and Loathing*, 20.

14. Du Bois, *Souls*, 5.

15. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 146.

16. *Ibid.*, 174.