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# GENDERING THE FRONTIER IN O. E. RÖLVAAG'S *GIANTS IN THE EARTH*

JOHN MUTHYALA

*Not in all eternity can I sufficiently thank God, for the America journey was not for me  
what it was for many others.*

—Jannicke Saehle

(in a letter to her brother, Johannes Saehle, in Norway, September 28, 1847)

*The epic conquest of the continent must be read in the light of women's sufferings as well  
as in that of men's endurance.*

—Vernon Louis Parrington

Translated from the Norwegian into English, O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* narrates the saga of pioneer life on the American prairies. It is a saga that has the sanction of official ideology and the authority of a religious edict: to go on an "errand into the wilderness," explore

and subdue the frontier, which was the "basic conditioning factor" of American experience, and, in so doing, cultivate a new civilization.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is hard not to read the novel as dramatizing the power of Turner's frontier thesis because it seems to unabashedly affirm the frontier as the great American experiment. Even the marketing of this text in the United States aptly underscores this point.

Consider, for instance, the Perennial Classics edition published by Harper Collins in 1999, which has for its front cover a full-body image of a young man heaving a bundle of brush and thistle, ostensibly clearing the wilderness. At the bottom, behind his feet, we can glimpse a clear horizon contouring a stretch of land, perhaps already cleared by this pioneer, thus attesting to his stubborn resilience. The close-up picture of the entire body of the man, and

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the placing of the title at a level below his waist and under the bundle of thistle, give the image a mythic appeal: here is a human being who, by diligence, hard labor, and vision, finally becomes a giant who can at last lay claim to the frontier. As viewers, we get a sense that we are looking from the bottom up, from the land to the man who has taken it as only a giant can. Our own visual perspective, or rather, the angle that is afforded by the picture itself, is dwarfed by the enormity of the task, which the man executes with discernible purpose. Such a marketing of the text, however, subverts the author's own artistic vision, which seeks to contest such mythified representations of pioneer experience by depicting nineteenth-century transatlantic Norwegian migration and settlement in the Great Plains as a conflictual process of social and cultural translation in the New World.

Interestingly enough, the novel was first published in Norway in two volumes titled *I De Dage—Fortaelling om Norske Nykommere I Amerika* (In Those Days: A Story about Norwegian Immigrants in America, 1924) and *I De Dage—Riket Grundlaegges* (Founding the Kingdom, 1925). The difference between the Norwegian titles and the English title *Giants in the Earth* is telling: the one attests itself as a narrative; the other subsumes its narrative into a mythic discourse. This is not just an instance of a powerful American discourse appropriating a non-English text, because the author himself uses the Norwegian bible in which the term "giants," or "Kjaemper," had the more emphatic connotation of "heroes" and not mythic gods and goddesses.<sup>2</sup> It is this process of translation that renders deeply problematic any easy reading of *Giants* as a celebratory novel of the American frontier. As Norwegian clashes with English, as the immigrant author struggles to articulate New World experience in an Old World language, the contradictory demands of location and memory are sutured together by a powerful American discourse of westward expansion and an equally resilient Norwegian folk discourse of trolls, gnomes, and castles.<sup>3</sup> Multiply anchored in hegemonic culture and marginalized folklore, *Giants* insists

on remaining "poised in psychological uncertainty between two worlds"<sup>4</sup> as it negotiates the fluctuations of immigrant desire, the contingencies of history, and the ideological demands of multilingualism.

However, there is something more to canonizing non-English texts than unearthing and studying them for their ostensibly transgressive value. Multilingualism does not always guarantee occasions to contest the ideal of monolingualism and its attendant ideologies; sometimes non-English texts may subscribe uncritically to dominant myths and histories and undermine the subversive potential of the discourse of multilingualism. More importantly, *Giants* appropriates a dominant ideology and insists on using Old World motifs, beliefs, cultures, and folktales to articulate Norwegian American experience, thus making it difficult to view it either as a paean to Turnerian myths or as an imaginative and historically informed act of contesting the ideal of monolingualism.

Having taught this text several times, I am hardly surprised when in class discussions the one figure that emerges as most representative of the frontier, as "an American Adam," or at least a pioneer that one can idealize, is Per Hansa.<sup>5</sup> When his frozen body is found the spring after the winter in which he is sent on an errand by his wife to get a minister to administer last rites to a dying friend, the impulse to view Beret as the naïve subject—the community-oriented exile who refuses to assimilate—becomes especially easy. Per Hansa dies, bearing the elements, never yielding to the monstrous frontier, willing to lose his life in order to domesticate it, with his eyes still "set toward the west" (531).<sup>6</sup> But Beret Holm is different. While her husband nourishes an immigrant sensibility, she develops an exilic consciousness, perpetually alienated from her environment. While Per is eager to sever the ties that bind him to Norway and pursue his dream, his Soria Moria, the "symbol for perfect happiness,"<sup>7</sup> to Beret this eagerness bespeaks the monstrous impact of the frontier, specifically the desire to cast off the old and take on the new—"so they had sold off everything that

they had won with so much toil, had left it all like a pair of worn-out shoes—parents, home, fatherland, and people. . . . And she had done it gladly, even rejoicingly!” (258).

When Beret goes “mad”—has visions of her dead mother, crouches with terror inside the massive immigrant chest, prays unceasingly for forgiveness, and eventually sends her valiant husband on a mission in the dead of winter with little concern for his safety—it is indeed hard not to view her as symbolizing all that which thwarts the development of pioneer society. Beret reminds us of the difficulties we may often face in negotiating the demands of America. But it is Per’s vision, his tenacity in believing in the endless possibilities of reinvention, that we find so powerfully appealing. Or so the story goes.

But what problems emerge when we frame their different responses to the frontier as the tension between the immigrant and the exile, between one who eagerly assimilates and one who actively resists Americanization? At times even an astute critic like Harold P. Simonson, who otherwise makes a compelling case for the centrality of religious discourse and immigrant psychology in Rølvaag’s fiction, tends to gloss over the gender dynamics that shape Norwegian farming households in the Midwest. In arguing against other critics who dismiss Beret’s immersion in Christian theology, peasant psychology, frontier domesticity, and cultural rootedness, Simonson presents Beret as the apotheosis of Rølvaag’s artistic vision that insists on negotiating the “conundrum of the hyphen, feeling its ambivalent pressures and enduring the irreconcilable tension.”<sup>8</sup> But while Simonson feminizes this ambivalent space of the hyphen by contrasting it to Per’s masculine space of the frontier, I want to suggest other possibilities—the ambivalence of the hyphen is less the result of the existential anguish of a female migrant and more the complex working out and clashing of a gamut of obligations and expectations of Old World culture undergoing a profound transformation in the experience of transatlantic migration. The gendered modalities of

this transformation are what I am concerned with here, as opposed to emphasizing an alternate female space of hyphenation as Simonson does. Rather than viewing Beret’s and Per’s differing attitudes toward the frontier as being shaped by personalized ideas about America and choices about Americanization, shouldn’t we study the “female frontier” in juxtaposition to the male frontier, and perhaps even as an alternative to the male frontier?<sup>9</sup> But I want to push the matter further to consider what happens when we study the female frontier and the male frontier as *constitutive of each other*, a perspective that necessarily complicates the juxtapositional paradigm.

In what follows, I make two moves: (1) I use the “separate spheres metaphor” as a model to study the formation and sustaining of different “spheres” for Per and Beret, and (2) I use Davidson and Hatcher’s “post-separate spheres” model to examine the fluctuating dynamics of the separate spheres metaphor, that is, rather than viewing the spheres as relatively stable, I want to underscore the problematic ways in which these spheres, specifically with respect to Per and Beret, are “intimately intertwined and mutually constitutive.” In refusing to view women as a “universal or stable category” and as those who were “virtuous simply because they lacked the status, power, and position attained by middle-class white men,” this model avoids deploying gender as a category of experience and an analytical tool to either underscore the limitations placed on women or to affirm the celebration of feminine ideals.<sup>10</sup> I use this model because I wish to avoid viewing gender as a “metalanguage that orders other relations.” It then becomes possible to discover the “shifting dynamics of power and privilege” that inform Beret’s struggle with exilic memory and the pressures of conforming to her domestic sphere. Her struggle also marks her Americanization as she legitimates her presence in the New World by subscribing to a racialized discourse that positions Native Americans and Irish Americans at the margins of frontier existence.<sup>11</sup>

## SEPARATE SPHERES ON THE FRONTIER

It is not difficult to find evidence of the ways in which men and women in the novel, particularly Per and Beret, construct and inhabit gendered spheres of work and activity. They both play traditional roles—the man as the hunter, builder, and king, and the woman as the nurturer, homemaker, and queen. The one protects; the other yearns for protection. As Per dreams of building a “splendid palace” (127) and a “royal mansion for [Beret] and her little princess!” (52), Beret wonders if “a home for men and women and children could never be established in this wilderness” (44). Per’s focus on building a house and Beret’s concern with creating a home aptly emphasize the boundaries that separate the spheres they inhabit. Indeed, Glenda Riley notes that female domesticity may have been little influenced by the different frontier environments—the farm, ranch, mine, and so on—given the severe limitations of women’s spheres that relegated them to the obligations of homemaking, childbearing, nurturing, educating, and preserving family traditions.<sup>12</sup> It is their insistence on playing their traditional roles within their spheres—Beret’s interest in spirituality, sin, morality, and the afterlife, and Per’s “masculine” pragmatism regarding the harshness of winter, death, and sickness—that eventually leads to the tragic end, Per’s death. The quotation by Parrington that prefaces this article also tends to view the frontier in gendered terms by stressing the “endurance” of the man, implying physicality, and the “suffering” of the woman, implying spiritual and psychological concerns. To extend Annette Kolodny’s observations about American pioneers, Per and Beret “enacted sanctioned cultural scripts.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps one can go so far as to argue that *Giants* dramatizes one of Kolodny’s central arguments that unlike pioneer men who sought to tame and conquer the frontier, pioneer women like Beret provide alternatives to the masculine impulse to possess land because they are interested not in establishing kingdoms and cities but in creating gardens embodying a “complex

integration of home and community.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, “domesticity can be viewed as an anchor, a feminine counterforce to the male activity of territorial conquest.”<sup>15</sup>

Kolodny is far from affirming a benign, female nurturance that stands in stark contrast to male ideas of plunder and conquest. She is interested rather in how “women preserved to themselves some part of the landscape otherwise physically appropriated by men for the marketplace and metaphorically appropriated by men for erotic conquest.”<sup>16</sup> *Giants* certainly does exemplify Kolodny’s arguments, especially given the manner in which Beret’s and Per’s values and beliefs, specific to the gendered spheres they live in and the roles they sanction for each other, often collide and jostle for legitimacy. This is why it is especially important not to view Kolodny’s argument as being too traditional in its use of the separate spheres metaphor. This is because Kolodny is sensitive to the *play of power* in the construction of gendered spheres and the constant *struggle* for women to develop their own domestic spaces and gardens. I’d like to suggest that Kolodny’s emphasis on power and struggle compels us to reexamine two important implications of the separate spheres metaphor: (1) if men and women subscribe to the ideology of separate spheres, so long as the separateness is maintained, the pressure to conform is lessened and a certain kind of predictability and stability structure male-female relations; and (2) it is only the *crossing* of the borders of these spheres that engenders a confrontation with the powers and forces actively seeking to contain their transgressive impact. But if we inquire into the discursive and material force and pressure needed to sustain the spheres *as separate*—as natural and a given, so to speak—we will need to pay attention to the constant and often violent forms of power play that shape men’s and women’s desire and ability to sustain that sense of separateness between the spheres. This means that rather than viewing only the crossing of borders as having the potential to undermine the stability of separate spheres, we need to focus on the constant, repetitive negotiations

of power, privilege, and expectations by which a kind of gendering and separateness can be obtained. In drawing attention to these issues, I want to emphasize an idea crucial to the arguments I later develop: the entire gamut of ideas and beliefs that serve as the ideological armature for the separation and crossing of spheres is created and sustained by an ongoing process of struggle. In the specific context of *Giants*, I explore further the forms and modes that this struggle takes, how Per and Beret confront and deal with it, and with what effects.

As the novel progresses, as the pioneers begin to establish a settlement, and as Beret becomes increasingly perceptive of the transformations in her husband, which she views with disdain, and which also create a psychological distance between them, she begins to attribute all hardship and ill health to trolls and monsters and views herself as a sinner who would soon face God's anger for having agreed to accompany Per on the journey to America. In her discussion of the use of Norse mythology in *Giants*, Catherine D. Farmer argues that part of the reason for Beret's growing disdain for the frontier involves the gradual undermining of the harmonious relationship between the roles they both play in the novel, that of the Norse goddess and god Freya/Gerthr and Frey. Farmer notes that Per, as Frey, eventually "takes from Beret (Freya/Gerthr) her proper duties"<sup>17</sup> by doing things normally associated with the goddess of fertility: planting seeds, providing sexual pleasure, procreating. Per is successful in his venture, Farmer argues, because Per, having disturbed "his creative balance with Beret" and "having fulfilled his seasonal cycle, has become the embodiment of winter rather than of the 'creative force' of springtime."<sup>18</sup> Thus his death in the end can be viewed as a result of his having disrupted the harmony of their earlier relationship in which each of them affirmed the roles assigned them in their separate spheres.

However, Farmer subscribes to the idea that gendered spheres are relatively stable and tensionless until the boundaries that separate them are crossed. The implication of her argument is that had Per and Beret continued to

play their assigned roles of Frey and Freya, the tragedy of death and madness would not be necessary at the end of the novel. Because Per crosses the borders of his sphere by ultimately usurping Beret's functions and roles within her sphere, the balance between the spheres, however deeply sexist and ideologically motivated, could not be maintained. But there is another way of reading that disruption of the spheres: Per's insistence on affirming the role of the male principle, Frey, by displacing his ideas and obligations from his wife, the female principle, to the frontier itself leads not so much to a crossing of spheres as to Beret's inability or unwillingness to transgress the boundaries of her own sphere. What seems to be a form of border crossing is itself a reaffirmation, albeit in a different modality, of the legitimacy and need for the separation of spheres. Per transgresses the boundaries of his sphere not so much to disrupt or dismantle the sexist and uneven power play that informs the dialectic of spheres but to reestablish the privileges accorded to his own gendered space. Border crossing becomes a repetitive act of appropriating and reaffirming masculine power and status. What is striking in Per's transgression is that he continues to play the role of Frey except that he does it in relation not to Beret but to the frontier. In expending his energy to transform the frontier into a place of habitation and eventually into a "kingdom," Per develops an eroticized relationship with the frontier, precisely the kind of relationship that existed between him and Beret. As Ann Moseley observes, "Per, in turn, is increasingly absorbed by his attraction to the prairie and to the creative, almost sexual, power he feels in planting and harvesting his fields."<sup>19</sup> But like Farmer, Moseley also views this as creating disharmony between Frey and Freya, Per and Beret, thus leaving unexamined the assumption that the relationship between the spheres was relatively harmonious and free of tension until their encounter with the alluring but wild and monstrous American frontier. In an important scene in the novel, we find Beret initiating a moment of intimacy to which Per responds with a sense of guilt:

She begged him so gently and soothingly that he gave in at last and stayed in bed with her. But he was ill at ease over the loss of time. It wouldn't take long to lay a round of sod, and every round helped. . . . Yes, she was an exceptional woman . . . she had let the child roam around and play in the grass while she herself had joined in their labor; she had pitched in beside them and taken her full term *like any man*. (57, emphasis added)

Farmer reads this as Per's giving "a sexual reward" to Beret "for her industry and fruitfulness."<sup>20</sup> But it is worth noting that what Farmer refers to as "fruitfulness" has little to do with the nurturing aspect of Freya/Gerth and more to do with Frey's masculine impulse to plow and work the land and, by extension, the woman/goddess. It could be argued that Per indirectly encourages Beret to cross the border of her sphere by doing work normally associated with men. But it is clear in this instance that he is valuing her involvement in planting and working the land because it secures and affirms man's role as the cultivator of the land, which has a lot to do with the public realm of male activity. Thus reaffirmed in his masculinity, in his role as the provider and cultivator, Per indulges in a moment of passion with Beret.

In *The Minds of the West*, while drawing a distinction between the attitudes of European migrant families and Yankee families toward nondomestic female labor, historian Jon Gjerde notes that the commonplace involvement of European women in farm work was often perceived as a critique of American family arrangements where the gendered divisions of labor marked domesticity as the appropriate vocation for women. But as Gjerde perceptively notes, "The labor of European women in the fields, then, was perhaps a reflection of poverty, of the need to exploit all available labor within the household."<sup>21</sup> In this sense, what seems to be a "transgression against Beret's gender"<sup>22</sup> ends up as a gesture of reaffirming the power and role of Frey, the male god, and the legitimacy of the separation of male and

female spheres. It is for this reason that Beret's desperate attempts to retain a semblance of continuity and stability on the forbidding prairie by seeking to reclaim the significance and power accorded to her as a woman, as one occupying and living in a domestic sphere, can be interpreted as her struggle to use a particular system of values and codes in order to affirm the ideals of her sanctioned domesticity itself. This underscores the danger of fetishizing the transgressing of gendered spheres as engendering all forms of progressive, liberating practices. The creation of gendered spheres is a vexatious working out of various modalities of behavior, memory, activity, and tradition whose social codes and cultural values are determined in a conflictual process fraught with contradictory desires and perverse motivations. To better understand why Beret considers herself the cause of the inexplicable challenges they face in the frontier, we need to focus on the events that happened in Norway prior to their departure to America. As I will soon argue, it is the domestic sphere in which Beret is made to define her identity as a woman in Norway and its transplantation in America *without any significant transformation in its demands and obligations* that eventually drive her to a form of madness.<sup>23</sup>

Lincoln Colcord makes the point that Rølvaag's "chief character, Beret, is a failure in terms of pioneer life . . . who could not take root in new soil."<sup>24</sup> In a similar vein, Paul Reigstad writes, "Beret's frail nature gives way before the overwhelming crudity of life in the wilderness, and she cries out for a godly life, which she believes is attainable only in the old country."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, by the time we come to the third novel of Rølvaag's prairie trilogy, *Their Father's God*, Raychel A. Haugrud states that Beret becomes a "whining, inconsiderate hag, and therefore she can never find complete happiness."<sup>26</sup> To Haugrud, this is because Beret realizes, right away in *Giants*, that "she can never be happy in living in America; her homeland is much too precious."<sup>27</sup> Like Colcord, Reigstad, and Haugrud, Sara Eddy also views Beret's desire for Norwegian culture and tradition as her belief

in cultural organicity, the notion that culture possesses a core, an unchanging essence, that should not be relinquished. As Eddy notes, with reference to Beret's vexatious relationship with her Irish daughter-in-law in the second novel, *Peder Victorious*, "To be Norwegian, to Beret, is as essential a quality as being a cow or a sparrow, and betraying the elements of that quality, like speaking another language or 'mixing' with another race, might produce an abomination, something unnatural and inhuman."<sup>28</sup> To be sure, all of them view Beret's refusal to adapt to pioneering as providing another competing and realistic account of the impact of westward movement on settler communities, particularly on women, thus foregrounding the "shadow-side of the mythic garden and frontier."<sup>29</sup> However, to all four critics, Beret stands for things that hinder and slow down Americanization.

But such views do not address two central issues: first, the continued circumscribing of Beret within a domestic sphere even as Per as a man can transform himself and his beliefs by negotiating the challenges of the frontier and become more Americanized; and second, the burden on the woman to create a new home in a new environment while severing all ties to other homes in other places, a burden that obfuscates non-American experiences of the gendering of work and daily activity, and profoundly affects the different responses to the challenges of the frontier. While I have already addressed the first issue, I restate it here so it can be placed in context with the second one. The powerfully appealing discourse of self-reliance and change, which are pivotal transformative moments in the process of Americanization, also authorize the repetition of particular practices of gendered behavior which, ironically, run counter to the very ideals of adaptability and flexibility that ostensibly give meaning to new forms of socialization in America. In other words, for Per to emerge as an American pioneer requires that the gendering of their spheres be intact. It is the predictability of the gendered spheres, their repeatability and sustainability, that shape the Americanization of the male pioneer.

When in America the cultivation of the frontier becomes Per's sole concern, Beret feels diminished for having been supplanted as Per's main object of interest. Although she is cautioned in Norway about Per's probable dalliances with other women, it is her ability to attract and remain the woman to whom Per is most attracted that gives Beret a supreme sense of confidence in herself—"She alone among women held his heart. . . . for him she was the only princess" (256). Ensnared in the gendered spheres in which she as a woman seeks her identity and worth primarily in being the center of a man's life and his only "princess," Beret faces on the American frontier the challenge of warding off other possible things and persons who could displace her own position, a fear that is realized when land, the physical frontier itself, not Beret the woman, becomes the site of fertility to Per. In America, the conflict between the spheres only intensifies but with a crucial difference. Whereas the sphere of male activity includes a man, Per, and land, the female complement, the sphere of female domesticity includes Beret, the woman, but lacks the male complement, as Beret is replaced by land. The gendering of the frontier in this sense perpetuates the conflicts between the spheres evident in Norway prior to the family's departure to America.

#### OLD WORLD/NEW WORLD

When we situate these acts and gestures of repetition in the context of Norwegian immigrant experience, Beret's "breakdown" has a disturbing logic—her inability to cognitively map the spheres of a domesticity in which she is no longer the goddess of fertility, the woman of sexual health and promise, the complement to the male principle, occasions a violent reassertion of religious beliefs that can provide a semblance of continuity and therefore meaning on the American prairies. Beret's turn to a kind of extreme religiosity grounded in Old Testament theology seems to affirm the argument that she is indeed unsuited for the rigors of transcontinental migration and that her desire for and belief in tradition, memory, culture, and



roots are naïve, simplistic, and unproductive ways of dealing with the exigencies and anxieties of travel and settlement. The problem with such a reading is the idealization of America, of America as offering life-transforming challenges and opportunities to settlers and immigrants. In addition, America is often viewed as offering a space for reinvention, for radical transformation, because it is a “new kind of space where the boundaries of home are dissolved or at least extended.”<sup>30</sup> The discourse of the “new” and the “beyond,” the belief that America affords different kinds of border crossings where one is often compelled to move from the old to the new, from roots to fluidity, from a tradition-bound existence to a new way of living where individual choice is valued—this discourse is what gives to America its drama of pain and tragedy, but also its magic and wonder. In this view, Beret’s apprehensions can be regarded as her continued subscription to a tradition-defined gendering of spheres, which gives her a space in which she can fulfill and realize her dreams of becoming a woman, a mother, a nurturer. Her misgivings about the prairie and the difficulties it poses, which drive her to religious extremism, can be seen to be incontrovertible evidence that Beret is almost unfit for America, that she lacks what it takes to become truly American.

But such a reading is flawed because it conceives of migration, particularly immigration, as a movement primarily from tradition to modernity, with America symbolizing all that is modern and the Old World all that is, simply put, “old.” I want to stress here how perversely one would have to misinterpret Beret’s non-American experiences so as to affirm such an American idea. *Giants* undermines this teleology of transformation. What we find in *Giants* is the opposite—in America, Beret is confronted with even greater pressure to conform to her sphere of domesticity. Rather than moving across a spatial and psychosocial continuum where the end point is the gradual breaking down of Old World prejudices and the formation of a new American consciousness, *Giants* dramatizes the disorderliness of transatlantic migration.

Indeed, what do we make of what happens in Norway prior to this Norwegian family’s departure to America? In what way can these events inform our understanding of the gendering of the American frontier experience? Why does the separate spheres model in this particular instance compel us to move toward the post-separate spheres model? Far from being a virtuous woman who relished her role as woman, daughter, and wife, in Norway Beret and Per have a “love” child much to the consternation of her family and the community. It is this sin of sexual transgression in which she gave “herself freely, in a spirit of abandoned joy” that weighs on her mind (256). In addition, in choosing to leave Norway with Per against her parents’ wishes, Beret commits, as she reflects on this in America, the “sin of filial disobedience” by breaking the commandment to honor her father and mother.<sup>31</sup> But the act of leaving itself, coupled with the fact of having a love child and not yielding to her parents, is what troubles Beret: to leave the past, her home, her family, her traditions, her church—this is their unpardonable sin. It is intriguing that the Beret in Norway is almost a different character from the Beret on the American frontier. The woman who seems to relish tradition, harmony, balance, community, culture, and God in America is, or rather was, in Norway a woman who often pushed the boundaries of her domestic sphere by crossing them—she disobeys her parents, indulges in premarital sex, and transgresses accepted codes of female behavior.

We need to be careful, however, not to view this as evidence that a woman who eagerly subverted feminine codes in Norway eventually becomes “domesticated” in America. Such a view simply reverses the hegemonic myth of America as the modern site for female liberation by replacing America with an idealized Norway and romanticized Norwegian culture. Interestingly enough, in *Sexual Customs in Rural Norway*, sociologist Eilert Sundt notes that between 1831 and 1850 the “relationship between marriages and illegitimate births (excluding stillbirths)” in Norway was 100 to 30.8. In the district of

Helgeland, from which came the Norwegian settlers in *Giants*, the number of illegitimate children per 100 marriages was 45.5, which is a highly significant ratio.<sup>33</sup> Sundt's figures complicate the argument that by having a child out of wedlock, Beret bends social customs and, in the novel's context, emerges as a figure of transgression. At the same time, to view the important historical context provided by Sundt as having an unproblematic correspondence to Beret's experience would be to needlessly conflate history with literature and view literature as simply *reflecting* a social reality. The high rate of illegitimate births does not mean that bastardy was free of social strictures and that bastard children and their parents were treated the same as children born in wedlock and married couples. Some of the people whom Sundt interviews, and Sundt himself, demonstrate the hegemonic cultural and social orientation toward the social phenomenon of bastardy. That the sociologist often uses phrases like "deplorable experiences with regard to moral conditions in the countryside" and "pernicious influence stemming from the rural areas" in his research point to the cultural and ideological matrix within which bastardy becomes an object of societal concern.<sup>34</sup> In *Giants*, we learn that Beret was no exception to such pressures. Beret's "parents, in fact, had set themselves against the marriage with all their might, even after the child, Ole, had come" (255). They refer to Per as a "shiftless fellow" who "was wild and reckless" because he "got himself tangled up in all sorts of brawls." To these parents "no honourable woman could be happy with such a man" (156). These memories form the "cultural baggage she brings with her" to the American frontiers, and with every major challenge this settler family faces, Beret's belief that it was a "retribution for their very personal sin" of having a child out of wedlock is further strengthened.<sup>35</sup> That it is not the man but the woman who is burdened with guilt aptly underscores the gendered division of spheres that makes cultural upbringing and family heritage the sole responsibility of the woman.

Paying attention to Beret's non-American experiences fundamentally challenges hegemonic

narratives and discourses about Americanization and immigrant experience, which often make it easy to view and even appreciate Per as epitomizing the American frontier spirit embodied in the westward movement of the nineteenth century. More specifically, the primacy of America as the privileged site where a Norwegian peasant family's encounter with the pressures of modernity is marked by the transgression of separate spheres is undermined. The question then becomes not why a tradition-bound woman continues to refuse Americanization while her husband embraces it. It is not about a man who embraces America while his wife clings to a sentimental past. It is not about how the separate spheres created in the Old World are compelled to redraw their boundaries in the New World. It is, rather, about how in the very gendering of frontier experience, diverse acts and behaviors, which are legitimated by the ideology of separate spheres, are constantly being rearticulated and reinvested with different values, albeit by reaffirming and maintaining particular "norms" of domesticity that effectively relegate women to "the unrelenting attrition of chores and duties, the carrying on of innumerable bleak activities amid childbearing, loneliness, anxiety, and primitive conditions of medical care and treatments" while the men, in stark contrast to the women, "would be stimulated by the American democracy in which they soon found themselves playing an active part."<sup>36</sup> The promise of the West was culturally, socially, religiously, and politically available primarily to men, not women, which introduces an element of incommensurability vis-à-vis the vexed question of Americanization. Given the lack of recognition of women's work, their relegation to playing secondary roles in frontier families, and their highly restricted participation in civic and social life,<sup>37</sup> the more interesting question becomes, who benefits from cultural and social transplantation? Within these spheres of domesticity, however, there are other movements of displacement and realignment of values and codes, but with a significant difference in their translational modality. These values are often reinscribed to those deemed to be on the margins

of civilized life and, by extension, modernity itself, namely Native Indians and Irish immigrants. Thus, the American frontier, as it is experienced by this Norwegian family, positions the woman within the confines of domesticity. It also highlights not so much Beret's incapacity for pioneering but, as Dick Harrison perceptively comments, Per's "ironic and ominous" desire to establish frontier settlements "with distinctly regal and feudal casts," a desire that renders him "incapable of dealing with domestic affairs, and therefore of creating the homes that should have been the purpose of those visionary mansions" (emphasis added).<sup>38</sup>

However, in fulfilling her role as a woman, and in creating a new home, there occurs in Beret a kind of slippage of meanings and values in a process of othering. It enables her, as a marginalized subject, to reassign herself another "higher" subject position in a racialized social hierarchy by assigning to the Native Indians and the Irish settlers the "new" position hitherto occupied by the woman—the space of the marginal. This mode of realignment is not predictable and neither is it orderly and consistent throughout the novel. It is, rather, a constant shifting of subject positions in relation to the separate spheres, the landscape, the native inhabitants of the prairies, and other European migrant groups, which dramatizes the psychosocial imbrication of race, gender, environment, and immigration.

#### RACE AND FRONTIER DOMESTICITY

From the very beginning of their arrival in America, Beret constantly ponders the possibility of creating a home, a space of nurturance and support for the entire family, in a "nameless, abandoned region . . . beyond the outposts of civilizations" (43). When the settlers realize that they had indeed settled on an Indian burial site, Beret's response is one of stoic endurance: "Strangely enough, it did not frighten her; it only showed her more plainly, in a stronger, harsher light, how unspeakably lonesome this place was" (47). The vast, unending stretches of land and prairie, the harshness of winter,

and the desolate landscape of an Indian burial ground make the frontier a place that marks the end of human possibility, of creating and sustaining human life, society, and culture. To a woman who desires to fulfill her role within her sphere of domesticity by creating a home that can facilitate the growth of human civilization, the frontier is an uninhabitable place, not amenable to domestication. To Beret, "a home for men and women and children could never be established in this wilderness" (44) especially because, as she remarks to her pastor in *Peder Victorious*, she "cannot understand why the acquiring of a new language [English] must crowd out our own!"<sup>39</sup> In this instance, Beret construes Americanization as a form of linguistic imperialism. But even as language differentiates between the Old and New Worlds, and further positions Beret on the margins of American pioneer experience, her willingness to subscribe to prevailing codes of race offsets the threat of marginality posed by linguistic difference. To be sure, a primary reason why Beret assumes that civilization is not possible on the American prairies is because of the Indians, the "red children" of the frontier who "would not learn the ways of man" (115). Like the Indians, the Irish migrants also signal the impossibility of establishing a settler colony, because although European, they are "different," as different as the Indians from the Europeans.<sup>40</sup> Since the Irish "don't live according to the Scriptures" and are unable to produce their certificates of claim on the land, they are "nothing but a pack of scoundrels" (156). To Eddy, this displacement of antipathy from the Indians to the Irish foregrounds the constructed nature of race, particularly whiteness, and its ideological motivations. Because the Indians no longer posed a significant threat, the need to seize control of the land was less important than the need to manage the labor of European settlers. In this sense, whiteness acquires a racialized identity that has little to do with phenotype and more to do with the competition among diverse European immigrant groups vying for access to land and labor.<sup>41</sup> Eddy's comments

are insightful, especially as she makes clear the link between land, labor, immigration, ethnicity, and racial discourse. But what about Beret's initial misgivings about the frontier? What explains the eventual construction of Norwegian settlements on Indian lands, specifically the success of Beret's husbandry after Per's death, as evidenced in *Peder Victorious*? Are the modalities of Per and Beret's racialization similar or different? Does a "shared whiteness"<sup>42</sup> elide the gender differences within a racial group? How can we account for gender even as its forms of socialization are imbricated with race?

Since the frontier is coded with gendered meanings, the ascription of racial identity and the appropriation of a hegemonic racial discourse may also take different forms and acquire contradictory meanings. While both Per and Beret view Indians with skepticism, their understanding of Indian presence differs in significant ways. When faced with the realization that they have indeed set up their habitation on the grave of an Indian, Per and Beret respond in clearly different ways that are fundamentally shaped by the ideology of separate spheres. Indian presence, to Per, affords him the possibility of demonstrating his courage, a crucial component of his manliness. He muses: "This vast stretch of beautiful land was to be his—yes, *his*—and no ghost of a dead Indian would drive him away" (41, emphasis in original). Indian presence signals to Per that land in America is not for the taking but can only be acquired by dispossessing the Indians. Thus, the Indians pose a challenge to this Norwegian immigrant who is eager to claim the land, found a new kingdom, and establish his princely power, all of which give meaning and significance to his activities not just as a pioneer, but as a pioneer *man*. In a sense, Indian presence, to Per, keeps "alive the power of resistance to aggression, and [develops] the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman."<sup>43</sup> Beret's concern, however, is the lack of culture, sophistication, education, and nurturance that the Indians ostensibly signify, ideas and values that she is primarily concerned with

not just as a pioneer, but as a pioneer *woman*. This distinction is crucial to my argument because I am attempting to trace the "vexed and contradictory relations between race and domesticity."<sup>44</sup>

But the brief encounter early on in the novel between the Norwegian travelers and a group of Indians may seem to undercut my argument about the gendering of the frontier, especially given the intimate and nonviolent nature of the encounter—tobacco sharing by the Indians, the use of the "horse cure" and the "white rags" by Per to care for a sick Indian, Per and Beret sleeping together among the Indians and keeping watch over the sick man, and the gift of a pony by this Indian to Per as a gesture of appreciation (87, 91). To Eddy, however, these benign encounters set the terms for later confrontations with the Irish and the creation of a "shared whiteness" among the Irish and Norwegians that offsets their anxieties and fears of the Plains Indians.<sup>45</sup> The emphasis on "white rags" to clean the "brown" skin of the Indian (*Giants* 87, 89), a coloration that itself renders uncertain the attempt to determine the effectiveness of the cleaning process, argues Eddy, "reinforce or undermine the construction of whiteness."<sup>46</sup> My argument about gendering the frontier complicates Eddy's argument, in that Per's reaffirmation of white masculinity vis-à-vis his bravery in interacting with the Indians and even "curing" one of their sick with "white rags" is heavily dependent on Beret's physical presence at the Indian campsite, and more importantly, on Beret's willingness to give her apparel—"her very best apron" and "her home-braided garters" (92, 95)—to bandage the wounds of the ailing Indian. The man's insistence on having rags that are white to treat the wound have to yield to the woman's exigent desire to allow her own apparel to be used for treating the Indian; that is, the gendering of whiteness realigns the boundaries of separate spheres by underscoring the ways in which Beret's experience of the Plains as a woman shapes and informs Per's construction not just of masculinity but of white masculinity.

While the overlapping of land and labor are concerns for the male pioneers, to Beret,

the female pioneer, the possibility of creating a "female garden" hinges on her active denial of the social, cultural, and historical significance of burial grounds for the Indians. But this is not simply a matter of personal or collective prejudice. What is of interest is the economy that links the experience of migration and relocation to the repetitive, gendered practices that structure separate spheres in the New World: the conflict for this Norwegian pioneer woman is one between affirming herself as a "fertile" woman within her sphere of domesticity by creating a home for her family on an Indian burial site and recognizing the power of memory and tradition to shape Indian attitudes toward the Norwegian settlers. Thus, it is only by positioning the Indians in an inferior racial position in relation to the Norwegians that Beret is able to realize her potential *as a woman*. A particular form of racial coding authorizes a particular form of domesticity. But this nexus of race and gender has a religious dimension that makes it difficult to view Beret's devotion to Old Testament Christianity as a sign of female madness resulting primarily from patriarchal oppression. This is nowhere more evident than in her musing about her village church in the Old World.

In Norway, the churchyard was a familiar place to Beret, so familiar indeed that she knows where each one of her relatives, counting back to generations, is buried in the church graveyard. Her familiarity with her church and the churchyard points to her attachment to the village community, her past, and by implication, her tradition and culture: "In the midst of the churchyard lay the church, securely protecting everything round about. No fear had ever dwelt in that place. . . . She knew where all these graves lay" (262). The churchyard facilitates a mode of material and discursive mapping that enables her to construct a sense of home and belonging within a defined and familiar territory. In America, the Norwegian settlers establish their homes not in uninhabited wilderness but on an Indian burial site. But the significance of the churchyard is not easily translatable across cultures largely because

she eschews all contact with the Indians and views them as an uncivilized people who, by implication, cannot even comprehend the cognitive mapping that a church graveyard can offer to a "civilized" woman in the New World, an irony that is lost on Beret since she belongs to a family of peasants and fishermen in Norway. Still, the strange Indian "other" exerts a powerful hold on their imaginations. To Per, in their presence "there was something that made it almost impossible for him to tear himself away" (85), and to their children, the graves "exerted a strange and irresistible fascination" (73). Even given her powerful sense of memory and tradition, Beret is finally unable to fully appreciate the significance of death and burial grounds to the Indians because she is able to reposition herself as a racially superior subject in relation to them. By positioning the Indians as inferior racial subjects, Beret and her fellow Norwegian immigrants, despite all their misgivings about the frontier, eventually set up a settler colony on a sacred Indian grave. All this is not just to point out that a white pioneer woman exhibits racist ideas and views. What is important here is that in negotiating the immense psychological, social, and material pressures of the frontier, this migrant woman subscribes to a hegemonic racial discourse that enables her to affirm the legitimacy of a domestic space and the ideology of separate spheres.

Still, this leaves unaddressed Beret's embrace of a rigid religious morality in the New World. Robert Eric Livingston's arguments about migration and the undermining of place as a reliable and transparent mode of identification may be useful here. He observes that as people migrate and resettle in new locations, place seems to offer a semblance of continuity, a certain kind of resilience that resists the uncertainties and anxieties of travel. But in that movement of travel, it is the very undermining of place as "place," of place as a "contingenc[y] of location" that engenders a form of anxious living. He notes:

Since sense of place is commonly the bearer of moral order, erosion of place subverts

ethical understandings as well: *hence the resurgence of any number of Manichaeian moralities, in which the terror of unpredictability is met and mastered by a violent reassertion of moral legibility.*<sup>47</sup>

A form of moral coherence is obtained by a reassertion of binary codes to assuage the terrifying possibility of negotiating the “limits” of place itself. To avoid this confrontation with the liminality of place, it is necessary to impose a certain form of order. Given Beret’s inability and sometimes refusal to come to terms with the translational demands of her transnational journey, it is almost inevitable that the Old Testament orthodoxy of a vengeful God and pitiful sinners afraid of the “terror of consequences” should begin to offer at least an iota of order and meaning to her experience of disorientation as an “exile in an unknown desert” (180). Beret’s immersion in Old Testament Christianity is already compromised by her understanding, or rather, “mapping” of Indian burial land as a desolate place because she is unable to appreciate their history of habitation and tradition and positions them on a hierarchical social scale that makes Norwegian settler occupation of Indian burial sites less a matter of desecration and more a matter of inconvenience. Thus, her racialization of the Indians is intimately linked to her negotiation of the obligations of her domestic sphere. In other words, the mark of Beret’s Americanization is not an embrace of an individualist ethos, a nascent capitalism, or a severing of traditional languages, cultures, and beliefs. Rather, it is her growing implication in a racialized process of socialization that enables her to sustain and legitimize the ideology of domesticity. The dynamic that structures this process is not one that demands self-effacement or radical breaks from tradition and memory. Those moments, as we have seen, where there is a constant slippage of subject positions, where there is a repetition of sanctioned gendered behavior, are, to use Janet Floyd’s words, “imbricated within the disposition of power.”<sup>48</sup> Beret’s experience of the frontier as a *white* woman cannot be con-

ceptualized outside the ideological boundaries and power dynamics of the gendering of frontier life. The separate spheres not only reflect the ideological power of gender and its material effects but the ways in which the negotiation of these effects and the border crossings they engender produce and authorize particular racial codings of otherness.

But by the time we come to the end of the novel, Beret Holm ceases to exist—as a woman. The pioneer woman disappears so that the pioneer man, Per Hansa, can emerge as the sole proprietor of the frontier estate. This is the more disturbing tragedy at the end, not Per’s untimely demise in a billowing snowstorm, which Reigstad views as a “humiliating end for the jaunty Ash Ladd.”<sup>49</sup> Just before the final events unfold, Per, in a moment of reflection, muses about the profound transformations in the household economy that has so far sustained his frontier kingdom. The process of caring for his wife during her physical and mental sickness and her pregnancy has resulted in a severing of conjugal ties. This severing has less to do with the waning of sexual desire and more to do with the repositioning of the wife as a child in a domestic frontier economy:

During the years that her mind had been beclouded he had treated her as a father would a delicate, frail child. . . . So solicitous had been his watchful care over her through all these years, that *this paternal attitude had become fixed with him.* . . . To him she was still the delicate child that needed a father’s watchful eye. *To desire her physically would be as far from his mind as the crime of incest.* (515-16, emphasis added)

The tragedy that unfolds in the Hansa family is that, though Per becomes the apotheosis of the mythic American pioneer, a paternalist and patriarchal economy leaves no place for Beret to exist—as wife, mother, helpmate, equal. It requires her disappearance as a woman and her reappearance as a child. True, Beret’s story continues in *Peder Victorious* and *Their Father’s God*, where she gains a reputation as

a successful pioneer woman for expanding the farm, raising her children, and presiding over one of the biggest family estates in the county. However, this is not simply a case of a resilient widow who by dint of hard work and courage is able to provide for her family by becoming "the best farmer in the settlement."<sup>50</sup> As Orm Overland observes, "Beret has lived in the shadow of her charismatic husband and *only after his death* can the author explore her potential as a character" (emphasis added).<sup>51</sup> It is the death of her husband, the absence of the man, that enables her to emerge as the female pioneer but only within a farming economy that affords her the psychosocial and material spaces in which her value and identity as a woman could be renegotiated on terms over which she has at least a modicum of control and influence. In this context, then, while the post-separate spheres model affords a more complex approach to theorizing gender relations and studying frontier household economies, we still need to acknowledge how the Manichean allegories of the separate spheres continue to exert their violent force in ways that sometimes require the erasure of female presence, and tragically sometimes, necessitate the death of the man.

#### NOTES

It was at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, that I first taught *Giants in the Earth* in spring 2001. In writing this article I benefited immensely from stimulating discussions led by students in class and intense conversations with colleagues in Paideia discussion meetings. Students at the University of Southern Maine, where I am presently teaching, have provided, over the last four years, valuable insights into the novel. By offering criticisms and suggestions, the three anonymous reviewers of this article helped me develop my arguments more rigorously than I could have done had I not been fortunate to have their input. A special word of thanks to them all.

1. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), 1.

2. Einar Haugen, *Ole Edvart Rølvaag* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 76, 86.

3. See Orm Overland's *The Western Home: A Literary History of Norwegian America* (Northfield, Minn.: Norwegian American Historical Association and University of Illinois Press, 1996) for a comprehensive treatment of Norwegian American literary history.

4. Neil T. Eckstein, "O. E. Rølvaag: The Marginality of the Bi-Cultural Writer" in *Ole Rølvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*, ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1975), 68.

5. Overland, *Western Home*, 359.

6. O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, trans. Lincoln Colcord (New York: First Perennial Classics, Harper Collins, 1999). Further citations to *Giants in the Earth* are given in parenthesis in the text.

7. Raychel A. Haugrud, "Rølvaag's Search for Soria Moria," *Norwegian American Studies* 26 (1974): 103, [http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume26/vol26\\_5.htm](http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume26/vol26_5.htm).

8. Harold P. Simonson, *Prairies Within: The Tragic Trilogy of Ole Rølvaag* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 8.

9. Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 2.

10. Cathy N. Davidson, and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., Introduction to *No More Separate Spheres!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 7, 11-12.

11. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, *The Frontier of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 5; Davidson and Hatcher, *No More Separate Spheres!* 8, 12.

12. Riley, *Female Frontier*, 2.

13. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 12.

14. Ibid., 12.

15. Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity" in *No More Separate Spheres!* ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 185.

16. Kolodny, *Land Before Her*, 12.

17. Catherine D. Farmer, "Beret as the Norse Mythological Freya/Gerthr" in *Women and Western American Literature*, ed. Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1982), 181. Also see Philip R. Coleman-Hull's "Breaking the Silence: Hymns and Folk Songs in O. E. Rølvaag's Immigrant Trilogy," *Great Plains Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1995): 105-15. In discussing the use of music in the novels, Coleman-Hull underscores the deep psychological divides between Beret and Per that are also registered in the music they listen to, sing, or remember. Whereas Beret likes sacred songs and

hymns, Per finds Norwegian folk melodies more appealing. This difference in musical orientation, to Coleman-Hull, foregrounds the differences in their existential worldviews on the prairies, which also profoundly shape their understanding and response to the challenges of settler life.

18. *Ibid.*, 188-89.

19. Ann Moseley, *Ole Edvart Rølvaag* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1987), 31.

20. Farmer, "Beret as Freya/Gerthr," 181.

21. Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethno-cultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 173.

22. Farmer, "Beret as Freya/Gerthr," 181.

23. There was a high incidence of madness among immigrant groups in the late 1800s. Nearly 33.2 percent of the insane were foreign born, while immigrants constituted only 14.77 percent of the national population. The proportion of Scandinavians among the insane jumped from 28.3 percent to 30.7 percent between 1886 and 1890 in the state of Minnesota, where Scandinavians comprised only 16.5 percent of the population (Harold P. Simonson, "Angst on the Prairie: Reflections on Immigrants, Rølvaag, and Beret" in *Norwegian American Studies* 29 (1983): 89, [http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume29/vol29\\_03.htm](http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume29/vol29_03.htm)).

24. Lincoln Colcord, Introduction to *Giants in the Earth*, xv-vi.

25. Paul Reigstad, *Rølvaag: His Life and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 117.

26. Haugrud, "Rølvaag's Search for Soria Moria," 7.

27. *Ibid.*, 7.

28. Sara Eddy, "'Wheat and Potatoes': Reconstructing Whiteness in O. E. Rølvaag's Immigrant Trilogy," *MELUS* 26, no. 1 (2001): 142.

29. Simonson, "Angst on the Prairie."

30. Janet Floyd, *Writing the Pioneer Woman* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 2.

31. Barbara Meldrum, "Fate, Sex, and Naturalism in Rølvaag's Trilogy" in *Ole Rølvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*, ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1975), 46.

33. Eilert Sundt, *Sexual Customs in Rural Norway: A Nineteenth-Century Study*, ed. and trans. Odin W. Anderson (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 9-11.

34. *Ibid.*, 7, 19. This work was first published in Norway in 1857, 1864, and 1866, and Anderson's English translation is based on the 1857 publication. It is important to historically contextualize Sundt's comments. Arvid Brodersen notes that because Sundt worked for years as a church minister and as a scientist, his work embodies a sustained tension between his Christian faith and Enlightenment principles. Given his emphasis on those living on

the margins of society—derelicts, alcoholics, laborers, jail inmates, etc.,—Sundt earned the nickname "Fante-Sundt," derived from the term "fanter," which means "vagabond." Although he used terms such as "depravity" in examining sexual customs in Norway, rather than subscribing to traditional religion's focuses on the vileness and sin of human nature to explain sexual behavior, Sundt sought to provide a cultural materialist analysis as exemplified by his detailed examinations of barns and lofts as sleeping quarters and the practice of "nattefrieri" or "night courting" in Norway ("Eilert Sundt" in *Sexual Customs in Rural Norway: A Nineteenth-Century Study*, ed. and trans. Odin W. Anderson [Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993], 275, 278). As Stephen G. Wieting observes, Sundt "casts his lot with a modern social science that resists religious conclusions and personal biases" (Afterword in *Sexual Customs in Rural Norway*, 186). I am pointing out these things to caution against dismissing Sundt's remarks as shot through, without complication, with elitism and disdain.

35. Diane D. Quantic, "Fairy Castle or Steamer Trunk? Creating Place in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2003): 254.

36. Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940), 65.

37. Glenda Riley, "Women's Responses to the Challenges of Plains Living," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1989): 178.

38. Dick Harrison, "Rølvaag, Grove, and Pioneering on the American and Canadian Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1981): 253.

39. O. E. Rølvaag, *Peder Victorious*, trans. Nora O. Solum and O. E. Rølvaag (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1929), 226.

40. The conflict between the Irish and the Norwegian settlers becomes even more complicated when Peder eventually marries Susie, an Irish woman. While *Peder Victorious* charts their period of romance and marriage, *Their Father's God* (trans. Trygve M. Ager [New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1929]) explores the conflicts between Susie's Catholic beliefs and practices and Peder's Protestantism. Peder's destruction of the crucifix and the rosary, which he refers to as "hocus pocus" (23), culminates in Susie's departure, thus underscoring religion as yet another vector along which the codes of racial discourse and gender ideology intertwine in mutually constitutive ways.

41. Eddy, "'Wheat and Potatoes,'" 5.

42. *Ibid.*, 1.

43. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 15.



44. Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," 185.
45. Eddy, "Wheat and Potatoes," 1.
46. Ibid., 3.
47. Robert Eric Livingston, "Global Knowledges: Agency and Place in Literary Studies" *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 148.
48. Floyd, *Writing the Pioneer Woman*, 2.
49. Paul Reigstad, "Rølvaag as Myth-maker," in *Ole Rølvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*, ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1975), 55.
50. Kristoffer Paulson, "Rølvaag as Prophet: The Tragedy of Americanization" in Thorson, ed., *Ole Rølvaag*, 58.
51. Overland, *The Western Home*, 363.