UNSETTLING SOUTH DAKOTA LITERATURE: COUNTERING LIONIZED REPRESENTATIONS OF A FRONTIER FANTASY SPACE

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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English Program
In the Graduate School
The University of South Dakota
December 2021
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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I challenge the pervasive notion of South Dakota as a settler fantasy space by considering several of its twentieth and twenty-first century literary offerings through the lens of Settler Colonial Studies. Settler colonial ideology has long dominated historical, sociopolitical, and literary narratives in South Dakota, affecting state policy, Lakota and Dakota sovereignty, public school curricula, the state’s economy, and even state and local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Notions of Manifest Destiny and a Wild West frontier continue to evolve, shift, and resolidify in South Dakota, playing a key role in the perpetuation of institutionalized disenfranchisement and dispossession of Native peoples. In literature, these troublesome binaries of cowboy / Indian and pioneer / Indian have historically been represented by South Dakota writers such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, O.E. Rölvaag, and Charles “Badger” Clark, who collectively constitute the state’s canon. Yet South Dakota boasts a multitude of writers who take up urgent issues of settler colonialism and grapple with them in productive ways. In this dissertation, I consider the novels of Black pioneer Oscar Micheaux, the oeuvre of bison rancher-turned-Lakota ally Dan O’Brien, the collaborative memoirs of American Indian Movement activist Mary Brave Bird, the contradictory and contentious works of Linda Hasselstrom, and the ecocentric poems of Courtney Huse Wika. I argue that these writers expose the tensions and complexities of settler colonialism in South Dakota. Their works challenge the dominant settler paradigm in South Dakota literature and culture, showing that despite its oversimplified, stereotypical, and deeply problematic frontier fantasies, settler colonialism in South Dakota remains complicated and unstable.

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without those who have inspired and challenged me over the years. I would particularly like to thank my outstanding professors: Jace DeCory, Amy Fuqua, Holly Boomer, Vincent King, Nicholas Wallerstein, Courtney Huse Wika, David Cremeau, Christine Shearer, and Tim Steckline for their patience with me when I arrived at Black Hills State University as a nontraditional student and mostly feral climbing bum; Nancy Cook, Katie Kane, David Moore, Quan Ha, Louise Economides, David Gilcrest, and Amy Ratto-Parks for introducing me to Western American literature, various reading strategies, and/or canon-busting at the University of Montana; and Paul Formisano, Lee Ann Roripaugh, Lisa Ann Robertson, and Skip Willman for helping me to continue down my lonely Western road (and who listened politely as I ranted about corn, sleet, and topography) at the University of South Dakota. I would also like to thank my parents, who seem to think that I have been reading Louis L’Amour novels this entire time, my former classmates—particularly Tom Stulken, Rena Patrick, Michèle Van Haecke, Rosemary Madero, Kim Covill, Robert Knapp, Rachel Mindell, Avery Guess, Joshua Rudnik, Heather Phillips, Kevin Phillips, Hanna DeLange, Meggin Killion, and Leslie Claussen—for lively conversations and empathetic encouragement, my climbing partners for keeping me on belay even when I was stressed out and probably incapable of holding a conversation that didn’t sound like an annotated bibliography, and my dearly departed cat Mittenz, who put up with far too much in our collection of sketchy grad school housing arrangements. And finally, I would like to acknowledge and pay my deepest respects to the Oceti Sakowin people. This dissertation was written on their ancestral homeland, much of it in their sacred Black Hills.
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Unsettling Frontier Mythologies in South Dakota Literature

In this dissertation, I challenge the pervasive and enduring notion of South Dakota as a prelapsarian fantasy space for settlers and their descendants by considering several of its twentieth and twenty-first century literary offerings through the lens of Settler Colonial Studies. Settler colonial ideology has long dominated historical, sociopolitical, and literary narratives in South Dakota, affecting state policy, Lakota and Dakota sovereignty and relationships with the state government, public school curricula, the state’s economy, and even state and local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Iterations of Manifest Destiny and shockingly durable notions of a Wild West frontier continue to evolve, shift, and resolidify in South Dakota, playing a key role in the perpetuation of institutionalized disenfranchisement and dispossession of Native peoples by way of pervasive, stubborn, and oversimplified binary oppositions which valorize resilient “pioneers” and tough “cowboys,” and pit them against troublemaking “Indians.” These problematic ideas fuel South Dakota’s ideological feedback loop, with settler colonialism promoted by various agencies ranging from historical societies to tourism boards and often even codified into law. The state’s cultural memory, too, functions as a key element of this feedback loop, which in turn further reifies South Dakota’s settler colonial pride and obstinance. In literature, these troublesome binaries of cowboy / Indian and pioneer / Indian have historically been represented—and validated—by South Dakota writers such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, O.E. Rölvaag, and Charles “Badger” Clark, who collectively constitute a dominant, settler canon which functions as a maintenance technique of settler colonialism.

Yet those thematic pioneer and cowboy binaries in that settler canon, are, of course, gross oversimplifications at best. South Dakota boasts a multitude of writers who take up urgent issues
of settler colonialism and grapple with them in productive ways. In the chapters that follow, I consider the novels of Black pioneer Oscar Micheaux, the fiction and nonfiction offerings by bison rancher-turned-Lakota ally Dan O’Brien, the collaborative memoirs of American Indian Movement activist Mary Brave Bird, the contradictory and contentious works of Linda Hasselstrom, and the ecocentric poems of Courtney Huse Wika. This dissertation argues that these writers expose the tensions and complexities of settler colonialism in South Dakota. Their works challenge the dominant settler paradigm in South Dakota literature and culture, showing that despite its oversimplified, stereotypical, and deeply problematic frontier fantasies, settler colonialism in South Dakota remains complicated and unstable.

**Settler Colonialism and Reluctant Discourse**

Settler colonialism as a mode of inquiry is a relatively new scholarly field. In his seminal text *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (1998), anthropologist Patrick Wolfe famously captured the distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism, explaining that “Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies . . . The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event” (2). Wolfe’s bold assertion articulated theoretically what indigenous people have known for centuries but has gone unsaid in academia. In Wolfe’s obituary (2016), his colleague Lorenzo Veracini credits him with founding Settler Colonial Studies; *Settler Colonialism*, he explains, was “ostensibly a history of Australian anthropology,” yet “to explain the evolution of anthropology, Patrick defined settler colonialism as distinct from colonialism. No one had theorised it before and in a systematic way. Now a classic, *Settler Colonialism* practically established what is now a burgeoning scholarly subfield” (Veracini “Patrick”).
The “burgeoning scholarly subfield”—of settler colonialism as a branch of Colonial Studies, is becoming a distinct, interdisciplinary field in its own right, with indigenous displacement at its locus. Veracini, whose work I draw upon heavily in this dissertation, devotes a chapter to distinguishing settler colonialism from conventional colonialism in his text *The Settler Colonial Present* (2012).\(^1\) The Norwegian political scientist Aaron John Spitzer puts it this way in his essay “Constituting Settler Colonialism” (2019):

Settler colonialism is, as Wolfe famously claimed, an insidious, tenacious variant of the sort of conventional colonialism that once flourished in the Global South. Generally speaking, conventional colonialism exploited native populations to enrich the European metropole. Settler colonialism, conversely, aims to *remove* native peoples, making space for settlers to *reproduce* the metropole—to found New Englands, New Zealands, New Caledonias and so forth. (548)

Wolfe himself corroborated Veracini’s and Spitzer’s respective explanations, insisting that the difference between colonialism and settler colonialism ultimately lay in claims to land. He explains in his essay “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” (2006) that “Whatever settlers may say—and they generally have a lot to say—the primary motivation for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (388).

Wolfe and particularly Veracini, both Australians, coherently articulate the common features of settler colonialism across the globe but also the particulars of Australian settler colonialism, including the notion of *terra nullius* and Australia’s lack of treaties with the Aborigines.\(^2\) More work remains to be done on Australia, of course, but their foundational texts are, by and large, well-established. Scholars assessing conditions in other settler nation-states,
including Israel, Canada, Hawaii, Alaska, and the contiguous United States, are still untangling
the legal, sociopolitical, and cultural ramifications of settler colonialism, and producing valuable,
unprecedented work, sometimes sparking contentious debate because settler colonialism is so
enormously complex and since it so fiercely critiques deeply-held, once-sacrosanct notions of
civil rights, home, property, and belonging. Even the vaunted American philosopher Judith
Butler found herself in critical hot water for her work on Israeli settler colonialism in her book
Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism (2012), in which, among other perceived
crimes of betrayal, she suggests that the formation of Israel may well be a “founding
catastrophe” (Butler, introduction). Her unprecedented position precipitated enormous outcry, as
Butler’s work on Israel and Zionism has arguably reached a new level of vitriol from various
camps in the American Jewish establishment. Critics . . . have taken off the gloves in terms of
their willingness to demonize, vilify, and excoriate Butler and her work” (237). As a Jewish
person, her detractors huff, Butler has no business questioning Israel’s displacement of
Palestinians.

Settler colonialism, in all of its global iterations, remains a deeply complicated and
heated issue, and settler states share certain similar features and patterns across the globe. In The
Settler Colonial Present, Veracini offers an excellent overview of settler colonialism’s common
features such as indigenous removal, settlers appropriating the right to welcome others from
indigenous people, the enabling of settlers and disenfranchisement of migrants via a nation-
state’s official policies, and the fact that settler colonialism is ongoing. However, the
particularities of that nation-state’s settler culture inform not only how the structures of settler
colonialism continue to endure but also the permissibility of the discourse itself. In Israel,
according to Butler, the horrors of the Holocaust and fear of charges of anti-Semitism among
would-be critics of Zionism, among many other difficult issues, inform rationalizing Palestinian
displacement to an enormous degree (Butler, introduction). In Hawaii, according to Candace
Fujikane introduction to her edited collection *Asian Settler Colonialism* (2008), a steady crush of
Asian settlers continues a historical pattern of disenfranchising Native Hawaiians, complicating
further the discourse about sovereignty, the state’s questionable annexation by the United States,
and its dependence upon an appropriative and assimilative tourist economy (2).

**Ideological Impediments to Settler Colonial Critiques in the United States**

As American historian Walter L. Hixon boldly proclaims in *American Settler Colonialism* (2013), “American history is the most sweeping, most violent, and most significant example of settler colonialism in world history” (1). Yet in the contiguous United States, a
stubborn reluctance to contend with—or even acknowledge—settler colonialism on a broad scale
persists. Violence, racism, genocidal efforts, and conquest are baked into the American story,
and despite the efforts of a small cadre of academics, we have yet to fully reckon with this sordid
reality of settler colonialism in the United States in the public sphere. This widespread denial, I
contend, stems from the durable Manifest Destiny and frontier mythologies that continue to
authorize and enable Native American displacement and disenfranchisement, despite the dubious
origins of these myths. As historian Richard White explains in *It’s Your Misfortune and None of
My Own* (1991), Manifest Destiny, a notion which decrees that Americans had a divine right to
settle, was “a product of a newspaperman named John O’Sullivan” (73). O’Sullivan coined the
phrase in 1845 and the idea gradually gained traction in the U.S. that:

The American claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess
the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the
great experiment of liberty and federative self-government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth . . . It is in our future far more than in our past or in the past history of Spanish exploration or French colonial rights, that our True Title is to be found. (qtd. in White 73)

For a young and restless nation with vast swaths of recently-acquired land, this notion would prove to be a strong and irresistible brew, soon manifesting in western settlement and justifying violent conquest of Native American lands in not only public sentiment but also codified law.

The intoxicating idea of the frontier atop this ideological layer of Manifest Destiny further justified settler colonialism in the United States. The valorization of an American frontier, too, was a construction of the American East and romanticized what might otherwise have been perceived as shameful moments in American history: massacres of Native people, gold and mineral rushes, land rushes, the cattle boom of the 1880s, and a very brief, lawless period—now reframed as the so-called Wild West—during which law enforcement could not maintain order among an enormous influx of settlers. Reflecting on decades of westering activity in the U.S., historian Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his controversial paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. There Turner argued that the existence of the frontier made America exceptional and distinct from European nations, delivering his bombshell claim that “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Taylor 3). His Frontier Thesis, as the paper would eventually be called, “revolutionized the teaching of American history in the colleges of the United States” for much of the twentieth century (Taylor viii).
While scholars are just now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, beginning to identify American expansionist history as settler colonialism, the New Western history movement of the 1990s made significant progress in terms of both correctly identifying American expansionism as a series of conquests and acknowledging multiple histories beyond those of white settlers heading West. That group of historians, which includes Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and William Cronon, identified the frontier myth as deeply problematic—suggesting that settlement was not as innocent as previously posited, and was instead bound to imperialist ideology and manifested as conquest. As Limerick puts it in her preface to *Legacy of Conquest* (1987):

> The fuzzy and forgiving term ‘frontier’ had drawn our attention from what westward expansion had meant to native people, as well as citizens of the Mexican north, and to the natural environment. But a quick dose of honesty could cure this problem: accept the applicability of the term ‘conquest’ to the United States’s westward expansion, and national self-understanding would be beneficially enhanced” (7).

Though Limerick and her New Western colleagues do not deploy the term *settler colonialism* in their works, their relentless use of *conquest* in its stead has begun to slowly hammer home its point—to academics at least, if not to a less-than-receptive public.

Yet expansionist and frontier mythologies continue to resonate within the American cultural imaginary, fixed there not only by history but also by the emergence of enormously popular genre Westerns and other cultural offerings, ultimately impeding productive discourse about settler colonialism. American reluctance to acknowledge settler colonialism—even under the New Western history umbrella of conquest—persists, overshadowed by faulty, romanticized perceptions of the West and its possibilities. This phenomenon is not new; as White notes: “For
more than a century the American West has been the most strongly imagined section of the United States . . . The imagined west is a mythic west” (*It’s Your Misfortune* 613, 615). The significance and endurance of frontier mythologies thus reinscribe American settler colonialism; as Richard Slotkin explains in *The Fatal Environment* (1985), “Myths are stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function that is central to the cultural functioning of the society that produces them. Historical experience is preserved in the form of narrative; and through periodic retellings those narratives become traditionalized” (16). Settler colonialism in the United States thus continues to be normalized, justified, and dismissed, a genocidal story on repeat, and American literature, too, plays an enormous role in its institutionalization.

While an exhaustive examination of normalizing and institutionalizing settler colonialism in American—and particularly Western American—literature is well beyond the scope of this South Dakota-centric project, I want to briefly explore some crucial and recurring tropes which aid in settler colonialism’s institutionalization and perpetuation. The sense of fulfilling a patriotic duty by participating in national expansion and its twin notion of taming the wild land, the stereotyping of Natives as savages, and the erasure of Native peoples from representations of the nation and of the American West all work in tandem to reify settler colonialism in American literature and culture. These tropes function as hallmarks of the genre, comprising what Gerald Vizenor refers to as the “literature of dominance” in *Manifest Manners* (1999). As a representative example, consider the nation-building rhetoric casually bandied about by Mari Sandoz in her biography of her homesteader father, *Old Jules* (1935). On just the third page of chapter one, Sandoz offers the Turnerian notion of “free land” as a descriptor for the terrain surrounding Valentine, Nebraska. She writes, “Because, in 1884, Valentine was the land office
for the great expanse of free land to the west and south, Jules stopped there” (5). This assumption of entitlement to the land continues unabated throughout the text, featuring most prominently in Jules’s pride in westward expansion. as we see in Sandoz’s valorizing justifications of Jules’s project, such as “A community can’t be planted like a potato patch, all in a day; a wilderness can’t be tamed in a year. It took the drilled Roman legions generations to roll back the European frontier” (120). The myriad of nation-building proclamations made by Jules himself, too, further exemplify a sense of national duty via expansionism, as we see in his declaration that “I’m not in it for the money. I’m trying to build up the country” (270). By positioning himself as a patriarch of the Nebraska frontier, Jules is doing his part to help the United States dominate contested land.

Moreover, American and Western American literature teems with casual and ubiquitous representations of Natives as irredeemable savages, which further justifies settler colonialism in the American cultural imaginary. These representations are not simply limited to Western dime novels—and co-opted, of course, by Hollywood for John Wayne star vehicles such as Red River (1948) and many more—but also appear in numerous, respected literary works. For instance, the revered writer Wallace Stegner, the so-called Dean of Western American Letters and winner of the 1972 Pulitzer Prize for Angle of Repose, casually explains local attitudes toward Natives in in his boyhood memoir Wolf Willow (1955). After his description of playing cowboys and Indians with his playmates, Stegner describes the reactions by the boys’ fathers when actual, living Natives come to town. A controlled panic ensued:

Our fathers sent us out to gather up every tool that had been left lying around, they double-padlocked chickencoops and sheds, they imposed a harsh curfew that haled us in from midsummer twilight unsatisfied and complaining. Their behavior was an explicit
reflection of local attitude: that an Indian was a thieving, treacherous, lousy, unreliable, gut-eating vagabond, and that if anything a halfbreed was worse. (50)

This demonization of Natives, neatly encapsulated by Stegner’s unbridled list of withering descriptors, both aptly sums up and adequately represents stereotypical attitudes as a key piece of settler colonial institutionalization in American—and in sometime Canadian resident Stegner’s case, North American—literature. It isn’t difficult to imagine who played the villain in young Stegner’s game of cowboys and Indians.

Erasure of Natives, too, plays a key role in institutionalizing settler colonialism in American and Western American literature. Indeed, Stegner got into critical—though posthumous—hot water with the publication of Dakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s scathing essay “Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner” (1996). Cook-Lynn lambasts Stegner for his remark in an interview that “Western history sort of stopped at 1890,” and charges that Stegner’s appropriation of indigeneity positions his narrative as dominant and completely erases Native experience (Cook-Lynn 29). As she explains, “His experiences, one supposes, are broadly accepted as the events and feelings known to second-, third-, and fourth-generation European immigrants to the land. As they did, Stegner simply claims indigenousness and begins to set down the new myths and stories” (29-30). While Cook-Lynn’s castigation of Stegner is certainly justified, he is not alone in his canonizing project of settler mythopoetics; we see a similar claim to indigeneity and concomitant Native erasure in the works of another of the West’s major authors, Willa Cather. As Dalia Kandiyoti cogently points out in Migrant Sites (2009), Cather “‘grounds’ immigrant and diasporic identities by having her protagonists inherit the American land: at once erasing Native American presence and bypassing anti-immigrant xenophobia, thus helping form new mythologies of American place” (Kandiyoti, introduction). The reason Native
Americans are conspicuously absent in Cather’s Nebraska texts, Kandiyoti asserts, is because Cather has granted claims of indigeneity to her Scandanavian and Bohemian protagonists.

South Dakota: A Ground Zero of Indigenous Issues and American Settler Colonialism

The lesser-known South Dakota literary canon, too, widely employs these harmful tropes of nation-building, Native savagery, and indigenous erasure, which is crucial given the state’s unrepentant efforts to actively maintain settler colonialism. South Dakota is an American ground zero of settler colonialism, and I want to approach its canon and how the circulation of its texts help to maintain settler colonialism by first explaining some historical, cultural, and economic lowlights for a bit of background. While the state might be best known for Mount Rushmore, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, the tourist town of Deadwood (thanks to the HBO series), and most recently for its notorious governor Kristi Noem’s hands-off COVID-19 mitigation strategies, Native American and settler colonial issues continue to roil within its drawn boundaries. South Dakota’s history encompasses numerous examples of American settler colonialism’s most brutal moments, including the broken Fort Laramie Treaties, the subsequent theft of the Black Hills from the Lakota people, and the Wounded Knee Massacre. That shameful history has never truly been reckoned with, let alone identified as settler colonialism or even conquest; instead, South Dakota and its settler culture celebrates it. Furthermore, lawmakers, entrepreneurs, civil servants, and certain artists and authors in South Dakota continue to perpetuate settler colonialism via those Manifest Destiny and frontier mythologies. In his work on Northern Australia, Spitzer notes that historically, Australian settlers used “force and deception. Hence, by the early 1900s, they had absorbed hundreds of Indigenous dominions very nearly spanning whole continents. Since then settler colonialism has been primarily about maintenance” (549). South Dakota’s
contemporary perpetuation of settler colonialism works in a nearly identical way, with maintenance of the settler state as its ultimate goal.

While the examples are too numerous to catalogue here, I offer these recent, particularly galling examples of settler maintenance in South Dakota as context: for example, Oglala Lakota County (formerly Shannon County), has been the poorest county in the United States for decades, and the State of South Dakota has done little to assist improving quality of life on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Instead, in an echo of the culturally disastrous, Assimilation Era’s boarding school endeavor of the early twentieth century, the State responded to this ongoing crisis by removing Lakota children from their homes and placing them into foster care, where they often faced cultural erasure and physical abuse. The situation escalated to the point that in 2005, an organization called the Lakota Law Project launched its Lakota Child Rescue Project, aiming “to stop South Dakota’s Department of Social Services from seizing thousands of Lakota children without warning” (“Reuniting”). Even more recently, as Levi Rickert reports for Native News Online, at a Rapid City Rush game in 2015, 57 Native American students were sprayed with beer and loudly told to “go back to the reservation” by racist hockey fans, and instead of addressing the perpetrators, the next morning’s print edition of the Rapid City Journal fanned the flames further by blaring the victim-blaming headline: “Did Native Students Stand for National Anthem?” (Rickert).

The following year, in 2016, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, in line with the national trend to move away from racist and offensive place names (particularly those containing the word squaw, which abound in the American West), changed the name of the highest point in South Dakota, Harney Peak, to Black Elk Peak. The sacred 7,242-foot mountain, known to many Lakota people as Wakinyan Wahopi (where the thunder beings live) or Hinhan Kaga (the making
of owls), is perhaps most famous for its appearance in Black Elk’s vision, chronicled in John G. Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (1932):

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy. (43)

In a gut-wrenching turn of settler colonial irony, this revered mountain was named Harney Peak in 1855 for General William S. Harney, a brutal Army commander who took particular delight in slaughtering Native women. When the federal board changed the name to Black Elk Peak in 2016, then-governor Dennis Daugaard issued a statement that undercut history and granted primacy to ignorance and convenience instead: “I am surprised by this decision, as I have heard very little support in South Dakota for renaming Harney Peak. This federal decision will cause unnecessary expense and confusion. I suspect very few people know the history of either Harney or Black Elk” (“Gov. Daugaard’s Statement”). And as a final, recent example of institutionalized racism in South Dakota, the *Argus Leader* reported that in May of 2019, Kristi Noem earned the shameful distinction of becoming the first South Dakota governor to be banned from the Pine Ridge Reservation because of her authorship of two “riot boosting” bills, which aimed to quash future Standing Rock-esque pipeline protests [the pair of bills were later ruled to be unconstitutional] (Kaczke). Noem, in spectacularly corrupt fashion, had consulted the pipeline company TransCanada while drafting the bills, but not the tribes.
Moreover, South Dakota tourism, a key industry in the state economy, hinges upon the glorification of settler colonialism and perpetuates it further. South Dakota remains an escape valve for vacationing families in search of a Western experience, and its tourism centers around Mount Rushmore and Deadwood, which are located in the Black Hills, a so-called island in the plains, sacred to the Lakota people and rightfully theirs, according to the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Yet Black Hills tourism encompasses “all kinds of silliness,” as James Welch puts it, and includes “Panhandling Jackasses, the Shrine of Democracy [Mount Rushmore], The Cosmos, Reptile Gardens, the Holy Shrine Wax Museum, Bear Country, and the Timber of Ages Petrified Forest” (78). In addition to the “silliness” outlined by Welch, more blatant examples of frontier valorization in the Black Hills include the nightly “Trial of Jack McCall” reenactment of Wild Bill Hickok’s murder in Deadwood, the Gold Discovery Days celebration in Custer, the Fort Hays Chuckwagon Dinner and Wild West Show, the Four Mile Old West Town, a multitude of tourist attractions offering gold panning, and scores of local eateries and watering holes boasting hokey names such as the Red Garter Saloon, Desperados, the Frontier Bar, the Gold Pan Saloon, the Nugget Saloon, and the Hitch Rail. But the denigration of the sacred Black Hills into a settlers’ la-la land for vacationing white families, while important, is only a piece of the story.

While promotional literature and thousands of cheesy billboards touting the state’s settler-themed tourist attractions work to maintain this colonial fantasy in the economic realm, South Dakota’s most popular literary offerings further cement its wholesale embrace of Manifest Destiny and frontier mythology in the state’s cultural imaginary, ultimately aiding settler colonialism’s maintenance by circulating the same group of harmful tropes I pointed out in my earlier discussion of American and Western American literature to white readers in the heart of Lakota and Dakota ancestral lands. Here in South Dakota, the harmful effects of frontier rhetoric
and tropes become particularly urgent and tangible. Consider, for example, the reification of Turnerian ideals of free land, which perpetuated the settlement of South Dakota via the Homestead Act of 1862. In South Dakota literature, this trope not only justifies white America’s presence in a vague sense but also a highly specific one: the continued occupation by the very descendants of settler colonists, along with the institutionalized abuses and racism these occupants feel entitled to enact. The notion of free land, for example, figures largely in the children’s and young adult literature homesteading novels by Laura Ingalls Wilder, South Dakota’s best-known and beloved writer. In a particularly telling scene in *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939), Pa Ingalls exclaims in wonderment to his family, who has just arrived in Dakota Territory, about “all this great prairie and nobody on it” and he goes on to proclaim that “we can just about take our pick of the land” (74). Here Pa clearly indicates that he firmly believes that the land is indeed free and for the taking, and as we see in his word choice “nobody,” he does not acknowledge its previous inhabitants or their forced removal at all, exemplifying Veracini’s observation that “the settler foreclosure of indigenous presences enables and potentiates the narcissism that presupposes the decision to ‘remove’ to an ‘empty’ frontier” (37). The greater De Smet area of Dakota Territory, according to Pa and his narcissistic settler outlook, is completely blank and therefore theirs for the taking. This trope of free land and the taming of the West emerges repeatedly in numerous other South Dakota works, most notably in the poems of Charles “Badger” Clark and his literary heir Linda Hasselstrom, both of whom I address in chapter four of this dissertation, and also in other South Dakota homesteading novels as well; O.E. Rölvaag, for instance, brazenly titled Part One of his epic *Giants in the Earth* (1927) “The Land-Taking.”
Moreover, representing Natives as savages is a common rhetorical move in South Dakota literature as well, and in South Dakota, this dogged insistence upon deploying this harmful trope carries the immediate danger of further eroding legal, political, and social relationships between Natives and non-Natives. In Wilder’s case, she focuses her biases against Native people in her South Dakota novels by way of her mother. In *The Long Winter* (1940), for example, after Pa Ingalls hears a Native man forecast an ominous, Northern Plains winter and attempts to tell his family about it, Ma interjects “What Indian?” and Wilder contextualizes Ma’s trepidation for her young readers by explaining “She looked as if she were smelling the smell of an Indian whenever she said the word. Ma despised Indians. She was afraid of them, too” (64). Wilder’s representations of Native Americans, needless to say, are deeply problematic, yet her books remain standard fare in many South Dakota elementary school classrooms, and the section of Highway 14 around De Smet proudly bears numerous signs emblazoned with the moniker “The Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Highway” for locals and tourists alike to admire. We see this trope of savagery in many other works of South Dakota literature as well, and I take up two interesting cases of it in this dissertation: in my exploration of Black homesteader Oscar Micheaux’s representational anxieties in chapter one, and Dan O’Brien’s short-lived experiment with Natives-as-savages in chapter two.

Native erasure, too, is a very common occurrence in South Dakota literature, and this willful oversight—particularly in more contemporary offerings—carries the triple threat of underrepresentation, invisibility, and segregation in a state where *Go back to the reservation!* remains a common response to any sort of disagreement between Natives and non-Natives. This theme, too, serves to reinforce settler colonial maintenance by positioning white culture as dominant and Native people as completely vanquished. For example, in his novel *Twisted Tree*
Kent Meyers tells the sad story of Eddie Little Feather, a young, queer, Lakota man who passes out drunk on the highway and dies there, run over by an 18-wheeler. His death does not spark an investigation or even garner much notice; one of only two indigenous characters in the book, excepting the epilogue—and his only Native character of substance—is dead in a ditch by page 91. To his credit, though Meyers does attempt to represent generational trauma to some degree, Eddie, like his ancestors at Wounded Knee, is ultimately erased from the dominant, white narrative. In addition, Dan O’Brien, too, experimented with Native erasure in his early fiction collection *Eminent Domain* (1988), but (unlike Meyers), ultimately abandoned this harmful mode of representation early in his career, as I show in my study of O’Brien’s journey toward Native allyship in chapter two.

**Decentering and Dismantling Frontier Narratives in South Dakota Literature and Culture**

Portrayals of South Dakota such as those by Wilder, Clark, Rölvaag, and Hasselstrom represent the state as a *tabula rasa* waiting to be inscribed by pioneers, cowboys, gunslingers, and gold miners, which in turn maintain the deeply problematic, settler colonial ideologies within the state’s culture at large. In the chapters which follow, I counter these damaging, monolithic representations by identifying four primary thematic concerns in South Dakota literature—settler complicity and arrivant colonialism, cultural appropriation and Native allyship, mediated authorship in Lakota works, and nature writing practices on contested land—through interpreting the works of several South Dakota writers who exemplify and contend with these problems: Oscar Micheaux, Dan O’Brien, Mary Brave Bird, Linda Hasselstrom, and Courtney Huse Wika. I interrogate how these literary offerings reify, complicate, or counter the dominant frontier narrative and concomitant settler colonial structure in South Dakota. These
writers collectively constitute a rupture in the maintenance of South Dakota’s settler colonial story.

In chapter one, I address Oscar Micheaux’s homesteading trilogy *The Conquest* (1913), *The Homesteader* (1917), and *The Wind from Nowhere* (1943) by considering them in the context of a heated debate within the field of settler colonialism, which questions whether people of color were and are complicit in settler colonial projects. In his trilogy, Micheaux’s characters do indeed exhibit Turnerian attitudes which wholeheartedly embrace Western expansionism and settlement, and enabled by the Dawes Act of 1887, his protagonists settle on the Rosebud Reservation, encroaching upon the already extremely beleaguered Lakota people. Yet his protagonists must still contend with the sociopolitical and economic oppression of Black people in the Jim Crow era even on the remote South Dakota prairie. In this chapter, I assert that Micheaux’s protagonists are clearly not settler colonials, but rather arrivant colonists—Jodi Byrd’s term for disenfranchised and diasporic migrants, queer people, and people of color who willingly relocate to contested locales. Micheaux’s arrivant colonial protagonists must negotiate a knife edge between the settler’s notions of civilization and savagery in order to succeed economically and survive socially, and that the constant strain of doing so gives rise to multiple representational anxieties in the texts. These anxieties manifest in Micheaux’s principles of exclusion, which prove to be just as important as his principles of inclusion. Micheaux, my close readings suggest, tends to change the subject when the glaring fact that he is carrying out his homesteading project on treaty land becomes too uncomfortable. I consider several key passages by examining not only what appears on the page but what does not, and by what precedes and follows them. Reading Micheaux in this way ultimately explodes the oversimplified pioneer /
Native binary, with the complexities of nonwhite settlement in South Dakota and the American West on full display.

Chapter two interrogates well-known South Dakota writer Dan O’Brien’s body of fiction and traces his progress, in all of its fits and starts, from his early work which deploys numerous harmful stereotypes about Native Americans, to his later novels which demonstrate a complex allyship with the Lakota people. As a white, male writer working on treaty land, O’Brien’s subject position exemplifies South Dakota’s dominant settler perspective, and in my careful consideration of his oeuvre in chronological order, I point out a multitude of ways in which his novels work to undo conquest—Veracini’s proposed solution for addressing the difficult task of decolonizing ingrained ideologies, since physical removal is nearly impossible in a settler colonial structure (103). *Eminent Domain* (1987), O’Brien’s early collection of short stories, is set in an American West curiously devoid of Native people, while his first novel *Spirit of the Hills* (1988) relentlessly regurgitates worn and harmful Native tropes. But his later works *In the Center of the Nation* (1991), *The Contract Surgeon* (1999), *The Indian Agent* (2004), and *Stolen Horses* (2010) reveal a slow progression—with occasional missteps—to a complicated allyship with the Lakota people: a representational undoing of conquest. I argue that O’Brien takes great care in these later books to represent his Lakota characters and Native issues with sympathy, which is a crucial factor in avoiding charges of cultural appropriation, while also steering clear of the so-called vanishing Indian trope which plagues *Eminent Domain*. These sympathetic and inclusive portrayals, I contend, demonstrate the complexities of ongoing settler colonialism in the New West and make important suggestions about decolonizing ideologically, if not physically.
Chapter three investigates the problems of mediation by white writers in the controversial Lakota as-told-to genre, with a primary focus upon Mary Brave Bird’s *Lakota Woman* (1990) and its sequel *Ohitika Woman* (1993), coauthored by Richard Erdoes. Their books raise numerous issues of authenticity, a contentious subject in Western American literature, and Brave Bird has come under fire by numerous critics, most notably Cook-Lynn, for collaborating with Erdoes, a white writer. In this chapter, I examine the various charges of so-called inauthenticity levied against Brave Bird and Erdoes by Cook-Lynn and others, and I offer an alternate reading of *Lakota Woman* and *Ohitika Woman* by weaving new scholarship by Channette Romero, which suggests multiple “alternative reading strategies” such as orality, spiritual ontology, and discursive characterization, into Gerald Vizenor’s already well-established notion of Native survivance. I show that these books by Brave Bird and Erdoes illustrate a multitude of Native issues, including alcoholism, missing and murdered Indigenous women, forced sterilization in the 1970s, poverty, cultural appropriation, land theft, and reservation life, and that by telling her story—mediated though it may be—we can still read these texts as crucial, Native resistance narratives and vital contributions to South Dakota literature.

Chapter four analyzes the works of four South Dakota nature writers and their representations of human relationships to South Dakotan landscapes, ecosystems, flora, and fauna, and the ways in which these representations reify or destabilize the ecological conquest inherent to settler colonialism. I first consider the hypermasculine, settler poetics of Badger Clark, who romanticized not only sociopolitical but also ecological conquest, and in doing so, established South Dakotan nature writing as a means to culturally maintain the settler state. Next, I turn to the often-confounding poetry and prose of Linda Hasselstrom, the self-proclaimed “voice of the prairie” who upholds the Clarkean tradition of settler poetics with much fervor yet
twins it with an environmentalist bent which ultimately undermines it. I then explore the nature poetry of Courtney Huse Wika, particularly selections from her chapbook *Perch* (2016), and I argue that her work reveals a clean break with that Clarkean tradition in that she decenters human importance and decries human domination, revealing an ecocentric rather than a hypermasculine, anthropocentric engagement with nature in the Black Hills. The chapter closes with a return to Dan O’Brien, in which I consider the decolonial implications of his two bison ranching memoirs *Buffalo for the Broken Heart* (2002) and *Wild Idea* (2014) by interrogating his project of restoring the Great Plains’s keystone species as well as its grasslands. In this section, I assert that O’Brien’s bison ranching memoirs illustrate his decolonial efforts to rectify both ecological and sociopolitical conquest. By surveying the works of these four nature writers, I trace a progression from ecological conquest to decolonial awareness, and I sketch the various ways in which these writers engage with settler colonialism, place-making and notions of home, fragile ecologies, and issues of sustainability.

Each of these writers’ works exemplify a thematic concern that demonstrates the vast complexities of settler colonialism in South Dakota, and this dissertation contributes to our understanding of South Dakota literature in three key ways: first, by considering the cultural offerings of the settler state of South Dakota in microcosm, we might better understand the myriad ways in which literature informs settler colonialism nationally and internationally; although each settler nation-state possesses its own particularities—such as the U.S. and its lethal frontier mythologies. As Veracini insists in *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010), “Narratives and their availability matter . . . settler colonialism’s inherently dynamic character . . . renders the issue of narrative particularly relevant” (96). In the chapters that follow, I analyze and interpret concrete, South Dakotan examples of decolonial narratives that demonstrate ways
to imagine decolonization and that push back against the state’s settler canon. Second, while settler colonial theory is currently gaining much traction in other disciplines within the American academy, particularly history and political science, American literary critics have been slow to acknowledge and deploy it, and very little work on South Dakota, that critical ground zero, and its literature and culture has appeared thus far, and certainly not on this scale.

Third, with this dissertation, I begin a difficult but crucial conversation which encompasses not only the enjoyment of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry from our comfortable armchairs, but also conditions on the ground, the history which got us to this point, and the multiple means by which settler colonialism endures. If, as Veracini tells us in *The Settler Colonial Present*, “Settler colonialism is not finished,” we might ask, given current conditions in South Dakota and in the U.S., whether it can or will ever be truly finished, and what some solutions might be (68). And if settler colonialism *can* in fact be finished, we might also ask whether reconciliation with Native peoples is a possibility, in conjunction with reparations for broken treaties and decimation of their cultures, or whether only complete, physical decolonization of South Dakota and other large swaths of the American West would suffice. Though I alone do not possess answers to those difficult questions, nor would I dare to speak for the Lakota people, I pose them here to underscore the cultural and sociopolitical currency of South Dakota literature. I contend that the group of South Dakota writers I address in this dissertation trouble the settler colonial waters, offering clues as to how we might alter our current trajectory. Although the settler colonial structure is very durable, these writers show that it is more unstable than we might expect.
Endnotes

1 See Veracini’s chapter one, “Settler Colonialism Is Not Colonialism,” in The Settler Colonial Present, for further delineation and an interesting analogy involving infections and hosts, with conventional colonialism explained as a virus and settler colonialism as bacteria.

2 Terra nullius is Latin for “nobody’s land.” This concept became a legal realization for land theft in Australia when, in 1835, the governor of New South Wales, Sir Richard Bourke, issued his Proclamation of Terra Nullius. This Proclamation decreed that no one owned the land prior to the British Crown’s seizure of it.

3 See Veracini’s second and fourth chapters, “Settlers Are Not Migrants” and “Settler Colonialism Is Not Finished.”

4 General Harney (1800-1889) served in the U.S. military for 45 years and was a veteran of the U.S.-Mexican War and the Civil War. Harney eagerly participated in many campaigns against Native peoples, and later in his career, his attacks on the Lakotas became infamous. His most notorious attack against them, according to Jeffrey Ostler’s The Lakotas and the Black Hills (2010), was his campaign against the Brulés, whom he decreed were “enemies of the United States” (44). Harney ordered a siege on their village at Ash Hollow on the North Platte River, killing “at least eighty-six Lakotas, over half of whom were women and children, and took seventy women and children captive” (44). After delivering his captives to Fort Laramie and ordering the arrest of escaped chief Spotted Tail, Harney—known to the Lakotas as “Mad Bear” and “the Hornet”—headed back east toward Fort Pierre, with “his wrath unsated,” as Ostler puts it, hoping to attack another band of Lakotas in winter (46). When that failed, he “demanded that leaders of all the Lakota tribes meet him there in the spring,” and there he attempted to negotiate terms that the Lakotas would not attack overland travelers through their territory (46).

5 The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 decreed that the Lakota people would keep all land west of the Missouri River in what is now South Dakota (then the southwestern portion of Dakota Territory). The Lakotas were to stop attacking military forts and settlers and to stop resisting the construction of roads and railroads. In exchange, the U.S. government was to provide clothing, shelter, health care, and schooling. When gold was discovered near present-day Custer, South Dakota in 1874, the Black Hills gold rush began and the treaty was ignored. In August of 1876, two months after the Lakotas and their allies defeated General George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry in the Battles of the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn in what is now southeast Montana, Congress enacted legislation to withhold the goods and services promised in the Fort Laramie Treaty until the Lakotas gave up their claims to the Black Hills. The Lakotas refused, and the Black Hills remain unceded treaty land to this day. My occasional use of the word theft throughout this dissertation as a descriptor for the Lakotas’ ancestral land, therefore, is wholly appropriate.
Chapter One

“On a Piece of Land That Had Once Belonged to an Indian”:
Arrivant Colonialism in Oscar Micheaux’s Dakota Trilogy

Before he made his name as the first independent, Black filmmaker of the twentieth
century, Oscar Micheaux took on a pioneering adventure of a much different bent, attempting to
establish a homestead near Gregory, South Dakota, in the final, third wave of American
westward expansion enabled by the Homestead and Dawes Acts. ¹ Born in 1884 in rural Illinois,
Micheaux toiled at menial jobs as a young man and, very dissatisfied by low pay, terrible
working conditions, and a disheartening lack of opportunities, finally landed the job which
would change everything. Working as a Pullman porter enabled him to see the western United
States for the first time and ultimately influenced his later foray into literature and film.
Intoxicated by the promise of the West, he moved to Gregory and began his homesteading
attempt, but when a disastrous drought threatened the productivity of his land, Micheaux thought
writing might prove to be more lucrative and promptly took it up, producing a manuscript of The
Conquest that would go on to inform many of his later novels and films. In the span of his four
decades-long career, Micheaux wrote seven novels and made forty-four films, and although he is
best-known for his films, his books, too, as Jayna Brown explains, “are of great social and
historical importance” (132). Micheaux’s chronicling of his Dakotan enterprise was published
first as The Conquest (1913). Its subsequent reworkings The Homesteader (1917) and the post-
Depression iteration The Wind from Nowhere (1943), comprise a “trilogy,” as Blake
Allmendinger insists in Imagining the African American West (2005), since Micheaux’s other
four novels “are not set in the West” (15). In this chapter, I consider Oscar Micheaux’s
autobiographical South Dakota novels through the lenses of settler colonialism, as well as
arrivant colonialism, Jodi Byrd’s astute term for settlement of indigenous land by nonwhite Others, many of whom with ancestors—like Micheaux’s—who were brought to North America by force. I primarily address this Dakota trilogy in my reading of Micheaux, and I also consider Micheaux’s sequel to *The Conquest, The Forged Note* (1915). Although *The Forged Note* takes place in Chicago, Atlanta, Birmingham, and New Orleans, I include it because of his character Mildred’s important meditations on race and upon western settlement.

Most of the significant body of Micheaux scholarship is devoted to his films, but his novels have received a fair bit of critical attention, most notably by Allmendinger, Michael K. Johnson, and Dan Moos. Despite their compelling readings of Micheaux’s books, none of these scholars consider his work in the context of settler colonialism or its implications, which, I think, a troublesome oversight, given his eagerness to acquire land and his disparaging remarks about the Lakota people. But at the same time, in the context of Native American disenfranchisement and displacement, while it is easy to point accusing fingers at waves of white settlers perpetually headed west, that monolithic, mythologized history ultimately proves to be whitewashed and grossly incomplete. The full story of the American West, of course, is messy, tangled, and teeming with movement in all directions by a diverse cast of ethnic groups. In broad terms, Micheaux’s eager participation in westward expansion raises multiple issues involving the potential complicity of people of color in the American settler colonial project. As a disclaimer and an explanation, although I do take into account a heated, academic squabble about whether people of color can be considered settler colonists, I am not interested in making an evaluative argument nor in slapping an oversimplified label upon Micheaux in order to condemn his participation in Western American expansion. Instead, I explore Micheaux’s motives in picking—of all the unlikeliest of unlikely places—Gregory, South Dakota, as a destination for
his personal Great Migration, and to consider how his project, driven by his allegiances to 
Booker T. Washington’s racial uplift philosophy and a Frederick Jackson Turner-esque western 
expansionist ideology, plays out. Of particular note in all three of Micheaux’s Dakota novels is 
his failure to acknowledge in print that his homesteading project displaces and disenfranchises 
the Lakota people, and what follows is my attempt to theorize this enigmatic blind spot. In this 
chapter, I argue that Oscar Micheaux’s South Dakota novels exemplify the instabilities of 
arrivant colonialism on the Northern Plains, and I contend that as an aspiring Black homesteader, 
the delicate knife edge that Micheaux’s alter egos negotiate in order to succeed and to maintain 
appearances results in multiple representational anxieties. These anxieties, in turn, give many 
readers the textual impression that Micheaux skirts the glaring issue of homesteading on stolen 
land, but if we read his works very carefully, Micheaux’s books suggest that he is fully—indeed, 
painfully—aware of his encroachments, yet he still feels compelled to settle in South Dakota 
because of the brutal, Jim Crow-era economic and social structures in the American East and 
South.

**Key Distinctions between Micheaux’s Dakota Novels**

Micheaux’s three semiautobiographical Dakota novels, somewhat curiously, tell, retell, 
and refine his homesteading experience near Gregory, South Dakota, in the early twentieth 
century. His first and prototypical book *The Conquest* is significantly more crude than *The 
Homesteader* and *The Wind from Nowhere*. In *The Conquest*, after recounting his hardscrabble 
boyhood attempts to find gainful employment in early chapters, young Oscar Devereaux lands a 
job as a Pullman porter and sees the American West for the first time. Intoxicated by the promise 
of the West, its myths, and its wide-open landscape, he decides he wants to become a 
homesteader and that the inexpensive land in South Dakota, newly opened to settlers, would suit
his purposes. After enduring a steep learning curve in horse trading and in accruing acres of land via relinquishments, Devereaux eventually establishes himself as a respectable local authority on both horses and land. Despite these successes, Devereaux is very isolated and lonely out there on the South Dakota prairie, and his love life, for much of the book, is wanting. He remains stifled by suffocating Jim Crow-era social mores that prohibit his courting of white, settler women. Devereaux suffers a brief and disappointing entanglement with a woman known only in the novel as “the Scotch Girl,” a character who will figure more prominently in the other Dakota novels, and their relationship ends because of Devereaux’s horror of miscegenation. Micheaux opens his ominously titled chapter “The Sacrifice—Race Loyalty,” with the line “I would have given half my life to have had her possess just a least bit of negro blood in her veins, but since she did not and could not help it any more than I could help being a negro, I tried to forget it, straightened out my business and took a trip east, bent on finding a wife among my own” (The Conquest 168). For the remainder of the novel, these trips east to Chicago occur more and more frequently as Devereaux attempts to find a wife to share in his Dakota homesteading efforts, and on these trips later in the book, he courts a Chicagoan named Orlean, whose disapproving father, Reverend McCraline, consistently attempts to undermine their relationship and split them up. Though Devereaux does manage to marry Orlean, the novel ends in very grim circumstances, with her having given birth to their stillborn son in South Dakota and subsequently capitulating to her father’s demands for her to return to Chicago. Devereaux is alone on his homestead, now ruined by drought, once again at the novel’s close. With this desperately unhappy outcome in mind, though Micheaux wished to inspire Black people to move west with his book, this novel could hardly serve as promotional literature for aspiring Black settlers.
The Homesteader, Micheaux’s second Dakota novel and first reworking of The Conquest, is far more refined and detailed, with 533 pages compared to The Conquest’s 311. In this book, Micheaux replaces his protagonist’s thinly-veiled alias in favor of the name Jean Baptiste, a Biblical appellation which notably recurs in his first talkie The Exile (1931)—yet another adaptation of The Conquest’s homesteading narrative. Micheaux attempts to situate The Homesteader as a Black epic on the prairie by dividing the book into four sections that he dramatically terms epochs: Epoch the First, Epoch the Second, and so on. In this text, Micheaux names the “Scotch Girl” Agnes Stewart, and she is a fully-developed character, appearing very early in the book to save Jean Baptiste from a blizzard, and in this book too, they fall in love but cannot marry because she is white. Micheaux also expands his descriptions of his relationships with his neighbors in this book and heightens the drama between them significantly. But it is Baptiste’s relationship with Orlean, one of the few characters from The Conquest who retains her original name, that is by far the most dramatized element of this novel. Here, too, since his protagonist cannot marry Agnes, he feels he must find a suitable candidate in Chicago, and Micheaux introduces Orlean very early in Epoch the Second. For the remainder of the book, her father’s evil machinations to tear them apart dominate the narrative—even more so than the disastrous drought—as we see in chapters histrionically entitled “The Preacher’s Evil Influence,” “More of the Preacher’s Work,” “Grim Justice,” and “Vengeance Is Mine. I Will Repay.” After Orlean returns to Chicago in this book, Micheaux closes on a somewhat happier note that will become a familiar theme in his books and films: his protagonist’s love interest, thought to be white, is in fact of mixed race and so he can marry her after all. This book’s version of the Scotch Girl was not fully Scottish, as it happened; in the final chapter, Baptiste discovers that “Agnes’ mother had not been a white woman at all, but in truth was of Ethiopian extraction”
(The Homesteader 530). After hundreds of pages’ worth of melodrama involving Baptiste, Orlean, and her tyrannical father, Baptiste finds true and practicable love on the Dakota prairie at long last with Agnes.

Micheaux’s final Dakota novel The Wind from Nowhere is yet another retelling of his homesteading story in South Dakota but marks a radical departure from the general outline of The Conquest in that his protagonist, named Martin Eden in a nod to Jack London, is already a wealthy landowner at the beginning of the book. The Wind from Nowhere was never particularly well-received in the early 1940s due to Micheaux’s unchanging, 1920s-style treatment of rigid racial and social hierarchies in the United States, his insistence upon generalizing most Black people as having “no conception of what it took to succeed,” and Micheaux’s newly-added, post-Depression horror of “lazy” people being on “relief” (The Wind (17, 67). This rare book has been out of print for several decades and isn’t generally thought by most scholars to have the historical and sociopolitical cachet of The Conquest and The Homesteader. Indeed, The Wind from Nowhere supersedes even The Homesteader in terms of vastly overblown melodrama and focuses almost exclusively upon Eden’s quest for a wife and the great tension between Eden and The Wind’s iteration of Linda and her meddling father, whom Micheaux calls Linda and the Elder. When Linda dies near the end of the book, Eden realizes his love for Deborah, the Scottish girl who in this novel, too, plays a far greater role than she did in The Conquest. Deborah appears throughout the text as Martin and Linda’s friend and neighbor, and here, too, Micheaux’s protagonist discovers that he can marry the Scottish girl after all at the story’s end, since Deborah’s “grandpa was colored too!” (The Wind 419). Yet the book’s too-fantastic content, perhaps, troubles the text; in Outside America (2005), Dan Moos blasts this effort by Micheaux as “a complete disconnection with the African American West” (73). At the end of the novel,
Martin and Deborah Eden become fabulously wealthy landowners, made so by the “great manganese deposit” on their original tract, which enables them to purchase and irrigate “more than a hundred thousand acres of Rosebud lands” where “Crop failures were no more” and “Huge yields were harvested from the fields, year after year” (*The Wind* 422). Micheaux’s impossibly successful homesteader’s denouement in this book marks a major swerve from *The Conquest’s* Oscar Devereaux, broke and broken, at that initial novel’s close.

**Micheaux: Complicit Settler or Arrivant Colonist?**

South Dakota’s literature reflects its settler colonial ideologies, culture, and history, and Micheaux’s homesteading novels occupy a unique position within these contexts because, unlike Laura Ingalls Wilder or O.E. Rölvaag, the cultural, legal, and sociopolitical winds of American settlement were not at his back. Yet Micheaux’s philosophies of homesteading align in many ways with white settlers in his books, and the various iterations of himself in the novels all seem to conveniently ignore the glaring fact that his homesteading project encroaches upon the Rosebud Reservation, a reserve exponentially smaller than the original Great Sioux Reservation created by the 1868 Fort. Laramie Treaty and which was divided further by the Dawes Act of 1887. His personal and somewhat curious version of the Great Migration, it appears, was not to relocate to Harlem, or Chicago, or Detroit, or Compton, but instead to move to the then-young state of South Dakota and attempt to enact the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer, which happens to play out on unceded treaty land. Though he published three novels about South Dakota, Micheaux and his homesteading project remain fairly enigmatic; while Black settlements were not uncommon in the West, as Nicodemus, Kansas, and numerous other Exoduster examples make clear, Micheaux founded no such enclave and in fact considers himself a “lone wolf,” as he puts it in *The Wind from Nowhere* (66). While all of his Dakota novels show his attempts to find a Black wife in great detail, the circumstances of his
geographical location make that endeavor exceedingly difficult; yet he remains in South Dakota, resolutely devoted to his homesteading efforts. Moreover, he valorizes Western American and settler mythologies and the cultural linchpins that help perpetuate it; in *The Conquest*, his first novel with a suspiciously settler-esque title, he notes in his recounting of his travels as a Pullman porter that Medicine Bow, Wyoming, was where “Owen Wister lays the beginning scenes of the ‘Virginian’” and a few pages later, he claims that he can sense “the spirit of Horace Greel[e]y” and hear his words “‘Go west, young man, and grow up with the country’ ringing in my ears” (43, 47).

Micheaux, it seems, wholeheartedly embraces settler colonialism, and his mentions of “the reservation” in all of his Dakota novels all refer to the Rosebud as a geographical descriptor but contain no acknowledgement of the gruesome history behind it and few mentions of its Native inhabitants. To date, only a handful of critics have noted Micheaux’s valorization of settler philosophy as a justification for occupying indigenous land. Johnson notes in *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* (2002) that in *The Conquest*, Oscar Devereaux, Micheaux’s thinly-veiled alter ego, “aligns himself with white settlers in opposition to native inhabitants, adopting white stereotypes of American Indians as his own” (75). Micheaux represents the Lakotas disparagingly in all of his novels, and when he bothers to mention them, he tends to deploy Native American stereotypes; of particular note is the drunken Indian stereotype in his fifth chapter of *The Homesteader*, which, he titled, in an apparent nod to Wild West tropes, “When the Indians Shot the Town Up.” In this chapter, Micheaux represents Natives as drunken savages bent on sowing chaos in white settlements, which echoes typical but persistent misrepresentations in genre Westerns. Micheaux gripes, “Indians who lived on the creek, coming into town, and then as a sally ride up and down the main street and shoot up the
town. The last time this had taken place, the bartender’s wife had been frightened into hysterics.

. . . they [the townspeople] feared the Indians, breeds, mostly, who made this act their pastime” (46). Micheaux uses this exciting moment to preface a judgmental complaint that the Lakotas were able to purchase liquor at all, never once questioning why they might be driven to drink or acknowledging the town of Gregory’s encroachment on the Rosebud.

Micheaux’s dogged omissions and seeming refusal to even consider Western settlement’s devastating impact upon Native people and culture underscores a glaring blind spot in his novel, which, again, points to his possible complicity in settler colonialism. In fact, Micheaux’s harshest critic, Joseph A. Young, comes close to calling Micheaux an outright settler as he makes his interesting but ultimately problematic argument in Black Novelist as White Racist (1989) that Micheaux suffered from internalized racism, which Brown summarizes as an oversimplified and flawed assertion that Micheaux “wanted to be white” and lambasts as “painfully reductive” in her essay “Black Patriarch on the Prairie” (2001) (139). While Brown’s apt charges of Young’s logical gaps certainly have merit, Young does offer one quasi-useful insight in the context of Micheaux’s enigmatic treatment of Native Americans that is worth considering:

Micheaux’s portrayal of Native Americans is consistent with the European imperial colonists’ tendency to dismiss aboriginal people as useless savages. Micheaux . . . ignores the fact that the Europeans did not just come to North America and easily settle into their modern culture. Modernization took almost four hundred years and thousands of lives, both civilian and military, to wrestle the land away from the Native Americans. (55)

Micheaux, according to Young, is an Other—a refugee from early twentieth century Jim Crow laws, poverty, and racism—who projects his own damaging biases against Native Americans and ignores the reality of why that land in South Dakota is even open to settlement. Micheaux, as we
can see, certainly benefits from the structure of settler colonialism in that he is able to accrue Native land, but questions remain, in thinking about his body of homesteading novels, as to whether the Western American representational machinery truly worked for nonwhite, westering people. And in terms of South Dakota literature, we might ask whether Micheaux’s novels are actually settler narratives, since the signifier settler radiates all of the brutality, greed, hegemonic aspirations, and genocidal aims of American western expansionism and conquest, or do these books reflect his complicity in settler colonialism?

I want to approach the complex issue of Micheaux’s role in settling and writing South Dakota laterally, briefly deviating from his novels to provide some theoretical scaffolding and to discuss a contentious debate within settler colonial theory at large, which questions whether people of color can be considered settlers. Again, I do not intend to make an evaluative argument about Micheaux, but I do wish to meditate upon where he might fit into the American settler project so that ultimately, we get a better sense of his wholehearted embrace of settler colonialism, his possible complicity in that expansionist project, and what cultural work his vexing representations of Native Americans perform. On one side of this heated argument sits Equity Studies professor Bonita Lawrence and sociologist Enakshi Dua, who make this bold and controversial accusation in their article “Decolonizing Antiracism” (2004): “People of color are settlers. . . Histories of the settlement of people of color have been framed by racist exclusion and fail to account for the ways in which their settlement has taken place on Indigenous land. As citizens, they have been implicated in colonial actions” (134). This claim, to be sure, drew all sorts of righteous ire and sparked enormous scholarly pushback, and refuting Lawrence and Dua became a popular pastime in settler colonial studies. And as if making that fiery claim weren’t enough, Lawrence and Dua press further and attack academia itself, charging that a concomitant
issue lies not only in the participation of people of color settling but also in the treatment of their participation by academia and its imperfect theories, and in these theories’ supposedly convenient omissions and blind spots. They assert: “Critical race and postcolonial theory systematically erases Aboriginal peoples and decolonization from the construction of knowledge about ‘race,’ racism, racial subjectivities, and antiracism” (132). To Lawrence and Dua’s credit, the “post-” in postcolonial theory remains problematic in settler colonialism because in a settler situation, there is no tidy pulling of stakes and vacating back to the metropole. As Lorenzo Veracini reminds us in his chapter “Settler Colonialism Is Not Finished” in The Settler Colonial Present (2015), settler colonialism is ongoing (68). But postcolonial and settler colonial studies remain distinct fields, and postcolonial theory is often not very useful in thinking about settler formations, particularly in the American West.

Moreover, another of academia’s crimes, according to Lawrence and Dua, is scholars’ supposed refusal to acknowledge people of color’s complicity in settler colonialism. They grouse: “Left unaddressed is the way in which people of color in settler formations are settlers on stolen lands . . . Although marginalized, at particular historical moments they may have been complicit with ongoing land theft and colonial domination of Aboriginal peoples” (132). Through this lens, a reading of Micheaux would simply condemn him as a settler, and his homesteading project as little more than overt land theft. But of particular note here is their seemingly dismissive aside “although marginalized.” While Lawrence and Dua do flatly condemn people of color as settlers here, this dependent clause seems to suggest that there are gradations of settlers, which might serve as an important offering of potential common ground—most notably, perhaps, to Lorenzo Veracini and Jodi Byrd, as we shall see—to the backlash of arguments their article inspired.
However, in their stern response to the argument posed by Lawrence and Dua, Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright take a more nuanced approach to the complexities of settler colonialism, particularly in the context of migration and diasporas, and counter that people of color cannot be considered settler colonists and that the grounds of making such a judgment at all are deeply flawed. In their essay “Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States” (2009), they retort:

A discourse that posits that “all migrants are settler colonists,” or that “all those who leave their ‘Native’ lands are colonizers,” necessarily renders the entire process of human migration as a serious problem, while denying the migratory histories of “Native.” Within this perspective, the only way not to be a ‘colonizer’ is to remain on the land with which one is associated, which is something that many people have been unable or unwilling to do in the past and that a growing number of people find impossible or undesirable to do today. (123)

In their estimation, Lawrence and Dua make an oversimplified argument in that they grossly underestimate human migration in general and deny indigenous migration in particular. Sharma and Wright insinuate that Lawrence and Dua’s entire argument is unsavory and assumes a static notion of land ownership rooted in white patriarchy. Lawrence and Dua, it seems, opened an irreconcilable rift with their essay, although—again, to their credit—they did spark a lively academic conversation. Veracini seems to think both sides are correct, and that there are degrees of settlers, jumping into the fray with this possible solution: “I believe that appraising the settler colonial ‘situation’ as an analytically distinct formation, may allow for reconciling these approaches. Settler colonialism should be seen as a system of power relations that simultaneously but separately engulfs both indigenous and exogenous subalterns” (47). There are
settlers and then there are Settlers, according to Veracini, or, to be more precise, there are settler colonists and there are exogenous Others who participate in settlement, and whether they benefit from hegemonic institutions, policies, and relationships seems to be the determining factor.

While Veracini’s “exogenous subaltern” designation certainly seems to describe Micheaux’s role in the settler colonial project, Jodi Byrd’s more lyrical, less stuffy term *arrivant* does similar work as a descriptor while also refuting Lawrence and Dua and, at the same time, alluding to the abduction practices inherent to chattel slavery. In Micheaux’s case, this is a particularly important distinction because his grandfather was a slave and “was sold off into Texas during the slavery period and is said to be living there today,” as he notes in an explanation of his last name in *The Conquest* (10). Byrd elaborates upon the origins of her borrowed term in her text *The Transit of Empire* (2011) and explains why making this distinction goes well beyond a tidy categorization of settlers, indigenous subalterns, and exogenous subalterns:

> Of particular concern is how to theorize the degrees to which indigenous peoples, settlers, and *arrivants*—a term I borrow from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite to signify those peoples forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe—have *functioned within* and have resisted *the historical project of the colonization of the “New World.”* (Byrd introduction, my emphasis)

Micheaux *arrives* in South Dakota, eager for a chance to become a landowner and to escape the racism, poverty, oppression, and lack of opportunities of the Jim Crow era. As Brown puts it, “In Micheaux’s vision, the ability to transform oneself from ‘property’ to ‘propertied’ was the ultimate articulation of attained freedom” (145). And though he technically *settles* there, we can
think of him as an *arrivant* rather than a settler colonist because of his subalternity and his desire to overcome his own precarity. As Veracini puts it in a final rebuke to Lawrence and Dua in his conclusion, “True, indigenous specificity is often erased in the context of antiracist movements and other contestations . . . and this erasure is dispossessory. Surely, though, we can distinguish between nonindigenous people as a sociopolitical collective and settler colonialism as a mode of domination” (102). Though Micheaux becomes a successful landowner, he does so to escape conditions of precarity, which I explore in more detail shortly, and not, to borrow Veracini’s excellent distinction, as “a mode of domination” (102). *Arrivant* seems to indeed be an apt descriptor for Micheaux, the enigmatic lone wolf, at least in terms of subalternity.

And while arrivant colonialism cannot readily complicate durable and institutionalized settler colonial structures, it does hinge upon a particular settler structure’s hegemonic practices. As Veracini explains, “Whereas a settler collective *appropriates* the indigenous right to welcome people to country, it also simultaneously retains the right to *unwelcome* exogenous ‘Others’” (38). The settlers, in other words, hold most of—if not all—of the cards. In the American West, numerous ethnic groups were lured West by the promise of economic freedom, exploited for labor, and at the same time, relentlessly persecuted for their Otherness. As Patricia Limerick points out in *Legacy of Conquest* (1987), “As railroads pushed into the Southwest, their heavy labor demands led the companies into recruiting Mexican laborers, contracting with them, and transporting them to the United States,” yet once there, these workers had to contend with widespread hostility from whites (244). Limerick also points out that the Chinese, too, faced exceedingly difficult discriminatory practices in the West, and she quotes Alexander Saxton’s description of white workers’ view of Chinese railroad laborers as “tools of monopoly” just prior to her explanation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882: “Negative images gleaned from traders,
missionaries, and diplomats in China predisposed the whole country to Sinophobia; the use of Chinese workers as strikebreakers in Eastern industries clinched the question. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act passed with little opposition” (262, 264). Yet in Oscar Micheaux’s case, as an arrivant homesteader in South Dakota, the situation is grim in a different way. Micheaux’s labor is not exploited as it was when he toiled in Illinois and as a Pullman porter, but he still experiences the constraints of white, settler social mores in a place with no Black community such as Kansas’s Exoduster enclaves or South Dakota’s Black colony in Sully County: Micheaux must not court or marry a white woman, he can never be considered a town father, and he must keep to himself; in other words, he can never truly belong. South Dakota will never really be his home, and no one expects him to stay long. I will elaborate upon these social constraints later in this chapter, but I gesture to them here so that we might fully appreciate the gravity of his tenuous conditions in Gregory County. In short and in a Veracinian context, Micheaux’s settler-neighbors will never truly welcome him, and he must play by their rules or get out.

Yet Micheaux’s merely being an arrivant itself doesn’t quite explain or excuse his disparaging remarks about Natives or his intense desire to accrue land, both of which still point to his complicity in settler colonialism. Micheaux’s potential complicity in settler colonialism thus stems from his participation in an adjacent form of colonialism within that settler structure: an arrivant colonialism enabled by the American settler structure and complicated by capitalism. In South Dakota, Micheaux’s alter egos, battered by precarious conditions in Illinois, transform themselves into successful speculators, a designation that lifts his Dakota oeuvre out of the realm of Place Studies and into economics and Western American history. Speculators have a long and lurid history of taking advantage of the Homestead, Dawes, and Burke Acts in the Great Plains and the West; Richard White offers this succinct definition in his book *It’s Your Misfortune and
None of My Own (1991): “Land speculators were people who bought land at auction from the government, using cash or land scrip, and then held the land until they could sell it to others at a profit” (140). Limerick delves further into the psychology of speculation, describing the practice as an “addictive and pleasurable experience” which aligned with the West’s other risky, economic pursuits, and Limerick likens speculation to a form of gambling (67). She explains:

Prosaic and monetary as it was, speculation still fit in the category “adventure,” involving equal doses of risk, unpredictability, and imagined reward. Like so many activities in the American West, speculation could shift meaning when viewed from different angles. To the beneficiary, accumulating profit, it was just another legitimate reward for getting there first—for having the nerve, the enterprise, and the instinct to acquire title at the right time. (67)

Thinking about Micheaux as an arrivant-speculator, then, offers a very different way to read his novels.

In this light, for example, all of his descriptions of potential places to settle early in The Conquest make a great deal of sense, both logically and fiscally. He isn’t drawn to South Dakota initially; he contemplates Idaho first, noting that “the conditions of the Snake River valley and the constructiveness of the people who had turned the alkali desert into valuable farms with from fifty to five hundred dollars an acre, thrilled me so that I had no misgivings for the future” (The Conquest 51). Idaho turns out to be out of his modest price range, however, and he briefly considers trying Iowa instead, but ultimately runs into the same problem: “I remember thinking that Iowa would be a fine place to own a farm, but quickly gave up any further thought of owning one there myself” after learning that there, too, land cost more than he could afford (The Conquest 52). Micheaux the aspiring speculator then lowers his standards and adopts the notion
of the frontier as a place to make money. He decides that “if one whose capital was under eight or ten thousand dollars, desired to own a good farm in the great central west he must go where the land was new or raw and undeveloped” after he overhears rumors about cheap land in South Dakota from some Pullman passengers (*The Conquest* 53). I will delve more deeply into the ramifications of this embrace of frontier mythologies in a moment, but for now I want to simply underscore that for Micheaux, going to South Dakota was a purely fiscal decision. As Byrd explains:

> It is all too easy, in critiques of ongoing U.S. settler colonialism, to accuse diasporic migrants, queers, and people of color for participating in and benefiting from indigenous loss of lands, cultures, and lives, and subsequently to position indigenous otherness as abject and all other Others as part of the problem, as if they could always consent or refuse such positions or consequences of history. (Byrd, introduction)

In Micheaux’s case, the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural weight of his conditions of precarity inspire his speculative efforts, and while his decision to go West is indeed volitional, South Dakota, as it turns out, was the only option available to him.

Micheaux wants very much to be a speculator and a homesteader, but continues to be thwarted by his economic precarity until he learns about South Dakota, a speculation opportunity, to be sure, but also a last resort because of his financial situation. Late to the homesteading game already and strapped for enough cash to finance his ambitions, Micheaux is initially duped by boosterism and by his own imagination. As Moos puts it:

> Micheaux chose to homestead in South Dakota because he had little money with which to purchase already improved farmland elsewhere . . . . But Micheaux’s grand vision of free land and agricultural opportunity looked rather unlike western reality in that the 1904
opening of the Rosebud Sioux Reservation to homesteading proved to be one of the last offerings of public lands in the United States. (57)

Micheaux conducts research about South Dakota and writes letters, only to get bad information about soil quality and rainfall from the government. He recalls in The Conquest, “the pamphlets received [from the Department of Interior] stated that the land to be opened was a deep black loam, with clay subsoil, and the rainfall in this section averaged twenty-eight inches in the last five years” (55). The bad rainfall information fools Micheaux at first, and he realizes the truth much too late; he devotes numerous passages in his Dakota trilogy to describing relentless, ruinous drought. The rainfall problem also illustrates a pattern that emerges throughout The Conquest: Micheaux being swindled as a gullible greenhorn and then his figuring out how to best make a profit through speculation, namely his accrual of land through relinquishments.

And throughout his Dakota novels, Micheaux’s speculation efforts influence every aspect of his life, and we can see his entrepreneurial logic dictating his thoughts and actions outside of the act of homesteading itself. Consider, for instance, Jean Baptiste’s proposal to Orlean in The Homesteader, in which, during one of his trips to Chicago, he tells her that he wants to marry her so that she can file on a claim in South Dakota and he can eventually acquire the title to her land as well:

Now, I do not profess love to you, Miss McCarthy, in trying to make this clear . . . I am an owner of land in the West, and I believe that you will agree with me, that it behooves any Negro to acquire all he can. We are such a race of paupers! . . . The proceeding is simple. It will be necessary only for you to journey out West, file on this land as per my directions, after which we can be married any time after, and then we can live together on your claim. Do you understand? (185)
In this remarkable passage—which surely must be one of the least romantic marriage proposals in all of American literature—we can see the transactional logic of Micheaux’s alter ego Baptiste at work: Orlean will file a claim, they will marry, and he acquires more land by proxy. We can see a similar logic at work in his approach to writing, which he also viewed as a transaction. Late in *The Homesteader*, after the terrible drought and looming bank foreclosure, Micheaux tries writing short stories as his latest scam and subsequently learns about another possible economic opportunity in self-publishing:

Then he tried writing short stories, but like the book manuscript, they always came back. He concluded after a time that it was a waste of postage to send them around; that in truth they were not read—and again, that there was no fortune in writers’ royalties always, anyhow. He was possessed with a business turn of mind, and one day he met a man who told him that it was possible for him to have his book printed and be his own publisher.

(407-8)

In this passage, Micheaux gives the reader the origin story of how he founded Western Book Supply, his own publishing house that printed the first editions of *The Forged Note* and *The Homesteader*. To get his fledgling new racket off of the ground, Micheaux sold so-called subscriptions to his white neighbors in South Dakota and exaggerated to them in his sales pitch, telling them that he was writing a Western and that they figured prominently in it.

**Micheaux the Speculator’s Precarious Beginnings**

Before I discuss the dual and modified philosophies underpinning Micheaux’s all-pervading speculative ambitions and the fallout resulting from them, I want to briefly examine the conditions of precarity that led Micheaux to these speculator aspirations in the first place. In her essay “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” (2012), Judith Butler
intones that “everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution, under unjust and unequal political conditions” (148). In the Jim Crow era, few social or economic institutions were in place to attenuate conditions of precarity for Black Americans. Racism was rampant, segregation was normalized, lynchings were commonplace, and poverty was staggering, to mention just a few of the very difficult, precarious conditions of that time period.

In Micheaux’s case, as he explains early in The Conquest, he has a very rough time when he first leaves his family farm in rural Illinois and sets off on his own as a young man to live with his brother in Chicago. There, he discovers brutal working conditions and exceedingly low pay in the limited range of menial jobs available to Black men at that time. He first finds intermittent employment at the Union Stock Yards: “The wages at that time were not the best. Common labor a dollar-fifty per day and the hours very irregular” (The Conquest 26). Micheaux struggles gamely along at the stockyards, noting that a reasonable job with fair wages was nearly impossible to find: “I soon found the mere getting of jobs to be quite easy. It was getting a desirable one that gave me trouble” (The Conquest 26). While his schedule becomes more predictable with his next job “in the coal chutes,” the back-breaking labor and low pay leave him disillusioned, since he was “cracking and heaving coal into the chute at a dollar-fifty per twenty-five tons” (The Conquest 28). Micheaux then tries shining shoes but found “that business, however, was dull” and so he begins traveling to the country to work on various farms (The Conquest 31). This, too, proves to be a dead end; in an ironic twist for this former farm boy and future homesteader, he finds farming to be “extremely difficult” because he “was unaccustomed to farm work since leaving home” (The Conquest 32). Though he doesn’t articulate it, it may be
that Micheaux abhorred the idea of working on someone else’s farm. But as we can see from this litany of failures, Micheaux endures grim conditions of precarity during his time as a young man on his own for the first time in Chicago, and I contend that this list of disorienting and brutal experiences made a lasting impression upon him and gave rise to his horror of poverty, which becomes especially apparent in his frequent, disparaging remarks about Black city-dwellers. Ultimately, his experience with precarity figures largely in his attempt to become a speculator in the American West.

Micheaux finally gets what will prove to be his big break—albeit with a twist—and secures a coveted job as a Pullman porter, and it is here that we see Micheaux first engage in questionable behaviors worthy of a land speculator. After he establishes himself in his new job, Micheaux appears, initially, to be successfully climbing the company ladder: “After working some four months on various and irregular runs that took me to all the important cities of the United States east of the Mississippi River, I was put on a regular run to Portland, Oregon. This was along in February and about the same time that I banked my first hundred dollars” (The Conquest 42). While this statement makes it seem as though he has finally landed a desirable job and is on his way to escaping precarity through honest work, Micheaux, like many of his fellow porters as well as some conductors, was fleecing the Pullman company through a practice known as knocking down, or taking some of the money when passengers paid in cash. Pullman did not pay their workers fairly, charges Micheaux, and all of the employees knew it: “Ignorant as many of the porters were, most of them knew that from the enormous profits made that the company could and should have paid them better wages” (The Conquest 50). In fact, Micheaux opens his Pullman chapter with a defense of the employees, arguing that of the Pullman “porters, as well as many conductors, who were in the habit of retaining the company’s money, let it be said that
they are not the hungry thieves and dishonest rogues the general public might think them to be. They were victims of a vicious system built up and winked at by the company itself” (The Conquest 48). Micheaux feels no remorse about his participation in knocking down, and this practice, in fact, enables him to purchase his land in South Dakota and was probably the only way he could have managed it. Allmendinger notes that “By ‘knocking down’ passengers—that is, by skimming money from travelers who pay for their accommodations in cash—Oscar acquires the money necessary to purchase land on the prairie” (23). Although Micheaux apparently did not knock down enough cash to be able to afford land in Idaho or Iowa, he did accrue enough to purchase relinquishments in South Dakota, on parcels of the Rosebud Reservation newly opened to settlement.

Despite his dubious practice of knocking down illicit cash as a Pullman porter, Micheaux was a fervent believer in Booker T. Washington’s controversial philosophies of racial and economic uplift, and Washington’s ideals, in conjunction with Western expansionist ideologies, inspired Micheaux to attempt to find success in the West. While Micheaux’s precarity provides much of the entrepreneurial logic of his speculator efforts, the prospect of Washingtonian racial uplift inspired Micheaux to want to make something of himself to serve as an example for Black Easterners, so that they, too, could rise above their precarious conditions. In fact, this may have influenced his decision to create these thinly-veiled alter egos: Oscar Devereaux in The Conquest, Jean Baptiste in The Homesteader, and Martin Eden in The Wind from Nowhere in his Dakota trilogy, as well as Sydney Wyeth, the traveling book salesman who romanticizes the Rosebud Country as he traverses the great cities of the American South in The Forged Note. Brown asserts, “In authoring fiction instead of straightforward autobiography, Micheaux removed himself from the line of direct criticism yet positioned himself as an example to black
people” (135). Micheaux wants very much to be an example of economic success for urban Black Americans, since he is convinced that most of them are lazy and consumed by vice. Washington famously insisted that Blacks could transform themselves and their station in American society, particularly the American South, via manual labor, farming, and industrial education in his “Atlanta Exposition Address” at the Cotton States Exposition in 1895, an assertion that drew all sorts of ire from Black intellectuals, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois dryly notes in his essay “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others” (1903) that “this ‘Atlanta Compromise’ is by all odds the most notable thing in Mr. Washington’s career” and goes on to offer a tidy summary of Washington’s proposals and his complaints about the immense damages Washington has subsequently inflicted, a searing verdict that is so brilliantly scathing that I quote it in full (35). According to Du Bois:

> It has been claimed that the Negro can survive only through submission. Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up three things,—

> First, political power,

> Second, insistence on civil rights,

> Third, higher education of Negro youth,

— and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. . . . As a result of this tender of the palm-branch, what has been the return? In these years, there have occurred:

1. The disenfranchisement of the Negro.

2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.

3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.
These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington’s teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of a doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment. (40-41)

Despite the obvious shortcomings outlined in the “Compromise,” as Du Bois calls it, Micheaux believes mightily in Washington’s proposals, particularly those pertaining to economics, although he warps them slightly to superimpose the West over the South, and in fact dedicates *The Conquest* to Washington. Washington had said in his Atlanta Compromise that “Whatever other sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world,” and to Micheaux, an even better chance lay in the West (168).

**The West as a Potential Site of Booker T. Washingtonian Uplift**

While Washington’s interest lay in *rehabilitating* the South through racial uplift, Micheaux felt that a completely fresh start would bear more profound economic results. Micheaux sought complete *economic transformation*—of wild and woolly frontier into arable farmland, and on a personal note, of struggling ex-porter into successful land speculator—and the West struck him as the perfect site to attempt such a monumental endeavor. Micheaux was hardly alone in this regard; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black settlements sprang up around the West as people fled the nightmarish conditions of the post-Reconstruction South. As Emily Lutenski explains in *West of Harlem* (2015):

> Beginning most famously in the 1870s with the Kansas group known as the “Exodusters,” African Americans who traveled to the West began to establish predominantly black towns. As [Ralph] Ellison’s “Going to the Territory” suggests, Oklahoma also became a major site of black migration from the South during the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it saw the establishment of many black
towns. Beyond Kansas and Oklahoma . . . California, Colorado, and New Mexico became
home to black municipalities. In New Mexico, the towns of Blackdom and Vado were
formed in the early twentieth century. (43)

South Dakota, however, was not very high on the list of desirable destinations in the West, and
relatively few Black people decided to settle there compared to Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, and
other locales. According to Dan Moos, “One of the states with the least number of African
Americans was South Dakota, with only North Dakota, Idaho, and Nevada having fewer black
residents. Of the nearly 144,300 blacks living in the West outside of Texas, only 465 (0.03
percent) resided in South Dakota in 1900, a full five years before Micheaux arrived there” (60).
Although not nearly as substantively documented as Nicodemus, Kansas or other Exoduster
enclaves, South Dakota’s most successful Black settlement was the Sully County Colored
Colony, which had nearly 200 residents at its apex. Founded by freed slave Norvel Blair, this
Colony was, according to a 2014 article in South Dakota Magazine, “a haven for African-
Americans seeking a road out of the racially oppressive Deep South in the late 1800s”
(Andrews). Micheaux’s solo, Booker T. Washington-inspired homesteading project, however,
positions him as an outlier not only because of his choice of South Dakota as a site for carrying it
out, but also because of his utter lack of community and dismal luck in romantic relationships.³
Even without the support of a community, the promises of the West proved to be irresistible to
Micheaux.

I have already pointed to Micheaux’s romanticization of Horace Greeley and Owen
Wister, and I want to emphasize that, then as now, Anglo-centric, Western American myth and
expansionist rhetoric is deeply embedded in the fabric of the American cultural imaginary, and
its brew is strong and intoxicating for the unwary; Micheaux, like so many other westering Americans, was certainly taken in by its patent falsehoods. One of its touchstone documents, Frederick Jackson Turner’s now-infamous Frontier Thesis (1893), situates the West as the ideal site for transformation, which he asserts will ultimately shape American character. Moos makes the compelling argument in *Outside America* (2005) that Micheaux twins Washington’s ideals with Turner’s Frontier Thesis, which in turn “produce[s] an African American pioneer who insists that the frontier is raceblind and thus offers unique opportunities for African Americans” (53). While I do agree with Moos to some degree, I contend that Micheaux valued economic opportunities far more than sociopolitical ones and felt that racial uplift would best be achieved by an entrepreneurial route, and that Micheaux’s frontier is decidedly not “raceblind,” as I argue later in this chapter. Late in the Frontier Thesis, well after he makes his famously bold assertions about how the fluid frontier shapes American character, Turner extols the virtues of the frontier’s economic opportunities and what they might later yield, which tidily sums up Micheaux’s expansionist philosophy and pairs well with his superimposition of the West over Washington’s South: “So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power” (Taylor 24). While Micheaux did not pursue speculation and thus participate in arrivant colonialism “as a mode of domination,” as Veracini alleges that settlers do, Micheaux does seem to feel that if more Black people took up homesteading, racial uplift would soon follow (Veracini 102). Micheaux’s alter ego Oscar Devereaux laments what he perceives to be a serious, racial uplift-stymying failure late in *The Conquest*: “I have been called a ‘radical,’ perhaps I am, but for years I have felt constrained to deplore the negligence of the colored race in America, in not seizing the opportunity for monopolizing more of the many million acres of rich farm lands in the great north-west [as he occasionally refers to the Dakotas] (252). His frustration
is rooted not in internalized racism, as Young so blithely argues, but in economics: Micheaux repeatedly implies that the urban, Black people whom he denigrates are not good capitalists.

All of Micheaux’s Dakota novels—and particularly *The Conquest*—contain numerous snide, hasty generalizations about Black people’s vice, laziness, and unproductivity, and through this lens of Micheaux as a speculator, we can deduce that he feels this way because they do not pursue speculation as vigorously as he does. For instance, in *The Conquest*, Micheaux grieves that there has not been an influx of Black homesteaders to South Dakota and the Great Plains, and he claims they are just too scared to try to make something of themselves. He complains: “Colored people are possible in every way that is akin to becoming good citizens, which has been thoroughly proven and is an existing fact. Yet they seem to lack the ‘guts’ to get into the northwest and ‘do things.’ In seven or eight of the great agricultural states there were not enough colored farmers to fill a township of thirty-six sections” (146). To earn Micheaux’s respect, it seems, and achieve racial uplift through economic clout, they would have to head west and participate in speculation themselves. These gripes about Black people’s lack of industriousness became a common theme in Micheaux’s work, appearing, for example, in his first talkie *The Exile*, in which we see Chicago portrayed as a hotbed of vice and laziness. We see Micheaux’s biases even in his heroine Mildred’s grand contemplation of her acquaintances and their relationship to alcohol in *The Forged Note*, in which Micheaux delivers what is likely his most sympathetic consideration of his fellow Black people. Mildred muses that

Race prejudice, that demon of American society, had succeeded in convincing so many of these weak people that there was no future; that the only resort was to get all the excitement out of life that was possible. How they conducted themselves to secure such a
life, was the one great detriment to the race, to the city, to the state, and in the end, the United States. (*The Forged Note*, ch. 10, my emphasis)

Even here, in his thoughtful recognition of racism as a societal and systemic issue, Micheaux lobs an *ad hominem* attack by referring to them as “weak people.”

And when his film career drew to a close and Micheaux started writing novels again, these biases reemerge in *The Wind from Nowhere*. At the close of this later book, Micheaux’s alter ego Martin Eden travels east with his new wife to hand-select hard-working Black people to join them in their new utopia in South Dakota:

Then Deborah and Martin went East, where unfortunate families of their race had been forced on relief. They selected from them the worthy and industrious ones, brought them hither and permitted each to buy and pay for out of earnings, ten acres of rich, deep plowed land . . . Twenty five years hence, a great Negro colony will call the Rosebud Country home and be contented, prosperous, and happy. (423)

We can detect Micheaux’s speculative optimism in this fantastic, ultimate enactment of Washington’s racial uplift, although such an achievement would have dimmer prospects in the South. The West has historically been the favored site of American utopian projects, as John M. Findlay notes in his essay “The Wishful West,” published in the collection *City Dreams, Country Schemes* (2011). Findlay explains, “As blank slates, America in general and the West in particular have been especially attractive to those Europeans and Anglo-Americans bearing plans to create model communities” (10). However, as editors Kathleen A. Brosnan and Amy L. Scott warn in their introduction to *City Dreams*, utopian visions often have exclusive as well as inclusive aims: “Suburbs and exurbs often become excludory places because a certain level of material comfort was beyond the means of large segments of the population” (5). The gated
communities of California are one example of these exclusory aims, and we can read Micheaux’s imagined Black utopia as another. Micheaux wants to welcome hardworking Black folks to his utopia, but he also wishes to keep those whom he deems *unworthy* and *unindustrious* out.

**Micheaux’s Speculator Biases Against Native Americans**

Moreover, many of Micheaux’s disparaging statements about Native Americans are grounded in a similar bias since he does not think that they are good capitalists either. But at the same time, Micheaux *Others* them and in some passages, gives his arrivant colonist’s interpretation of Natives to the reader. For example, in *The Conquest*, Micheaux announces, “A rich Indian is something worth associating with, but a poor one is of small note” (181). As a newly arrived Westerner, he explains Natives to the reader and gives them his insider’s scoop, judging them solely by their net worth and making this capitalist cultural assumption, not knowing about giveaways, feasts, or their cultural values. And when they do sell something, as we see in *The Conquest*, he judges them as not being discerning *enough* and being willing to sell everything they own and that the government “furnishes” them indiscriminately, and then turning around and buying unnecessarily luxurious items. He writes,

> The Indians were always selling and are, yet, [selling] what is furnished them by the government, for all they can get. When given the money spends it as quickly as he possibly can, buying fine horses, buggies, whiskey, and what-not. Their only idea being that it is to spend. The Sioux Indians, in my opinion, are the wealthiest tribe. They owned at one time the larger part of southern South Dakota and northern Nebraska, and own a lot of it yet. Be it said, however, it is simply because the government will not allow them to sell. (178)
We can detect a hint of disapproval in Micheaux’s tone here at what he deems to be any government assistance, and a similar strain of disapproval surges to the fore in his post-Depression horror of New Deal relief in *The Wind from Nowhere*. But there is a curious omission here: Micheaux steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the relationship between the Lakotas and the United States Government. Under the proviso in Article I of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 that “all war between the parties to this agreement shall for ever cease,” Article X promises the Lakota people a meager selection of goods. All Lakota men over the age of fourteen, for example, were to receive “a suit of good substantial woollen clothing, consisting of coat, pantaloons, flannel shirt, hat, and a pair of home-made socks,” and each person received “one pound of meat and one pound of flour per day” as well as 10 dollars annually for each person, with farmers receiving twenty dollars (“Fort Laramie Treaty”). These government-issued goods are not high quality or culturally relevant, and the Lakotas apparently wished to reject settler colonial material goods and offload them. Micheaux’s arrivant colonist’s judgement as to whether these are good capitalist practices or not thus shows a curious, willful ignorance. We can see, in his mention of the land “they owned at one time,” by which he means the Great Sioux Reservation created by the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, that he is aware of the history to some degree (178). Yet he does not acknowledge it in any sort of meaningful way here, and defaults to judging wealth by simply by land ownership. But the Lakotas squander this wealth, he feels, by not tilling the soil and transforming the land.

**Micheaux’s Notions of Civilization and Savagery**

In fact, Micheaux’s classist, speculator’s biases inform his notions of civilization and race as a construction, which is a prominent theme in his Dakota novels, and these biases rise from Micheaux’s interpretation of Black respectability in the West. In the South, Black respectability
was conflated with perceptions of being civilized, and for Micheaux’s idol Booker T. Washington, that meant productivity by way of industrial and agrarian labor. As Washington proclaimed in his Atlanta Compromise: “Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life” (169). That dignification and glorification of manual and agrarian labor, according to Washington, would lead to civilization. In Washington’s obituary, though he made sure to gently rebuke Washington for what he considered to be his more dubious accomplishments, Du Bois lauded his efforts to bring Southern Blacks into economic independence and respectability:

   We may then generously and with deep earnestness lay on the grave of Booker T. Washington testimony of our thankfulness for his undoubted help in the accumulation of Negro land and property . . . his spreading of industrial education and his compelling of the white south to at least think of the Negro as a possible man. (171)

Economic independence and respectability, Du Bois implies here, are the keys to so-called civilization in the eyes of Southern whites.

   But in the West, the frontier myth complicates Micheaux’s notions of civilization in terms of respectability in the eyes of his settler neighbors and his own perception of the Lakota people. According to Johnson:

   The myth is based on a racial opposition between the “civilized” (white) and the “savage” (non-white, usually American Indian but often African American or even lower-class whites or white immigrants) and tells the story of the evolutionary inevitability of the triumph of civilization over savagery and the dominance of the white race over all races.
The frontier myth is the narrative of the civilized individual’s journey westward into the savage American wilderness. (7)

For Micheaux, South Dakota becomes a place to become not civilized but civilizing. Although we can consider Micheaux to be an arrivant colonist rather than a settler, he has still taken the pernicious frontier myth at face value and believes strongly in the West as the best possible site to enact Washingtonian racial uplift. His homesteading efforts, after all, are on the side of civilizing the frontier and its Native inhabitants.

His prominent theme of civilization and savagery in Micheaux’s Dakota books thus also provides their deepest irony: Micheaux’s alter egos, particularly The Conquest’s Oscar Devereaux, recoil at Native Americans and at Black people whom they deem uncivilized. But at the same time, Micheaux’s alter egos constantly negotiate a delicate knife edge, a term I frequently deploy later in this chapter to denote his alter egos’ tenuous position among their settler-neighbors. Everything is at stake for his alter egos tiptoeing along this razor-thin edge with no margin for error: their searches for love, their livelihoods as speculators, and their senses of feeling somewhat welcome and safe from lynching on the remote Dakota prairie. Micheaux’s alter egos attempt to create the appearance of being civilizing so that they may successfully carry out their efforts as speculators amongst the settler colonists in the West. For Micheaux, both race and class are bound up in his interpretations of the divide between civilization and savagery, which in turn manifest in his alter egos’ derogatory treatment of Natives and apparent condonation of the American settler colonial project.

Curiously, in terms of his own representations of Native Americans, Micheaux seems to know that popular culture renderings of Natives are deeply flawed, yet he leans on these stereotypes himself, ostensibly to help justify his Turnerian attempt to transform the land. For
instance, in *The Homesteader*, in yet another of his insinuations that the Lakotas aren’t good speculators, he claims, “Notwithstanding all the roles in which he is characterized in the movies and dramas as the great *primitive* hero, brave and courageous, the people of the West who are surrounded with red men, and know them, know that they wish to sell anything they might happen to possess as soon as selling is possible” (101, my emphasis). Here we see Micheaux calling out pop culture representations of Natives, and again Micheaux offers his purportedly insider’s perspective to explain how things really are. But as we saw in *The Homesteader*’s fifth chapter, “When the Indians Shot the Town up,” Micheaux capitulates to these stereotypes and represents the Lakotas as savages himself, which points to his recurring theme of the tensions between civilization and savagery. Moreover, Micheaux deploys these stereotypes again in *The Homesteader*, when Jean Baptiste tries to woo Orlean and tells her his homestead’s origin story in third-person, prefacing his narration of how he has “longed for woman’s love” by telling her, “For years and years has Jean Baptiste labored to get his fields as they are. For, in the beginning, they were wild, raw, and unproductive, whereupon naught but coyotes, prairie dogs and *wild* Indians lived” (205, my emphasis). In this passage, too, Micheaux dismisses the Lakotas as uncivilized savages, and as we will see, his preoccupation with who is civilized and who is not helps to justify, for Micheaux, his occupation of their land.

Though he attempts to perform civilizing in his representations of his own alter egos, Micheaux continues to categorize other characters as civilized and uncivilized, a rigid dichotomy that also underpins his disparaging comments about Black city-dwellers. As I suggest earlier, Micheaux does not consider most poor, urban Black people to be good capitalists, and his notions of civilized and uncivilized in *The Forged Note* add yet another layer of complexity to his numerous authorial jabs and snarky asides in his other books. In *The Forged Note*, The
Conquest’s sequel, Micheaux’s alter ego Sydney Wyeth writes and sells his own books, roaming the cities of the American South to sell them and inspire racial uplift through his tale of homesteading in South Dakota. Throughout this book, Micheaux’s fixation with the civilized / uncivilized divide comes to the fore in his representations of urban vice; in fact, this novel is positively littered with judgments of who is and is not civilized. For example, consider the exchange between Wyeth and a group of pistol-packing men at a drugstore in Effingham (Birmingham, Alabama), in which the group mocks Sydney for not carrying a gun. One of the men even riffs on Wild West mythology, telling him: “You from out of the west and haven’t a gun. Man, you are crazy . . . Been living out in that wild country these many years and never owned a cannon? What kind of people do you have out there?”, to which Sydney curtly replies “Civilized people” (The Forged Note, ch. 16). The subtext here is that Sydney considers the white settlers on the supposedly wild frontier to be more civilized than the poor, Black denizens of Birmingham, with their jazz and their dancing and their loud talking late into the night. The Lakotas, however, whom Micheaux deems uncivilized, apparently slip his mind here and are conveniently absent from this conversation.

Moreover, Micheaux’s class biases, too, play a key role in his classifications of civilized and uncivilized. For example, near the close of Mildred’s deep meditations on her boozy acquaintances in this novel, she thinks about the intersection of race and class and how it affects her friends’ perceptions of themselves. She realizes that in addition to the discouragement about race prejudice, there was another feature that was worse still—class prejudice. The folly of it. The effect was more damnable, she knew, than all the other causes, for through it these poor creatures were made to feel that they
were actually bad; bad beyond redemption, which made them unfit for the civilized world. (*The Forged Note*, ch. 10).

This toxic intersection of social constructions, according to Mildred, is so very hopeless and so utterly unnavigable that her friends have zero chance of negotiating it at all, to say nothing of finding any success. Here, too, we see Micheaux’s recoiling from whom he deems uncivilized, although Mildred’s ruminations are arguably his most sensitive and thoughtful treatment of race and perhaps class in all of his oeuvre.

**Civilizing Speculation: Oscar Devereaux’s Moment-to-Moment Negotiations**

In order to speculate successfully, then, Micheaux’s alter egos constantly walk that knife’s edge trying to maintain the appearance of being civilizing, and they all must make moment-to-moment negotiations in order to accomplish this on the South Dakota frontier. Micheaux gets plenty of practice with making these speedy assessments of dynamic situations as a young man enduring precarious conditions. In the East of his youth, these soon-to-be strenuous efforts first manifest as overly polite sweet-talk—and perhaps even kowtowing—to prospective clients. For example, in *The Conquest*, young Oscar Devereaux learns that he will sell more of his family’s produce by physically bowing to his customers, aggressively complimenting them, and then making carefully tailored suggestions for potential add-on purchases:

> I met and became acquainted with people quite readily. I soon noticed that many people enjoy being flattered, and how pleased even the prosperous men’s wives would seem if bowed to with a pleasant “Good Morning, Mrs. Quante, nice morning and would you care to look at some fresh roasting ears—ten cents a dozen; or some nice ripe strawberries, two boxes for fifteen cents?” . . . I soon learned to give to each and every
prospective customer a different greeting or suggestion, which usually brought a smile and a nod of appreciation as well as a purchase. (15)

Here we see the beginnings of Devereaux learning to make these spur-of-the-moment negotiations. His customers are taken in by this very civilized young man and the extraordinary lengths he goes to, and his suggestions for additional items that they hadn’t intended to purchase usually work. And in Chicago, prior to becoming a Pullman porter, Devereaux continues to refine his salesmanship skills as a shoe-shiner, again putting on a silver-tongued, exceedingly civilized front, and making these on-the-fly negotiations. Micheaux reminisces,

“Shining shoes” is not usually considered an advanced or technical occupation requiring skill. However, if properly conducted it can be the making of a good solicitor . . . Few city people allow their shoes to go unpolished and I wasn’t long in finding it out, and when I did I had something to say to the men who went by, well dressed but with dirty shoes. If I could argue them into stopping, if only for a moment, I could nearly always succeed in getting them into the chair. (*The Conquest* 31)

Although he quits this job and moves on to his porter position, Devereaux appreciates this chance to continue to refine his craft, and he considers making these quick evaluations of his potential customers’ dress and shoes as well as his ability to argue successfully an important skill. And in this case, his sense of civilized and uncivilized becomes a valuable bargaining chip in his getting them to stop for a shoe shine.

Once Micheaux’s arrivant-speculator alter egos are in South Dakota, however, these negotiations of that knife edge accelerate and the knife edge becomes even thinner, exacerbated by the settler colonists’ rigid, racial hierarchy. His alter egos’ nonwhite statuses become magnified, offering a Northern Plains iteration of Zora Neale Hurston’s searing explanation of
hypervisibility in her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” in which she asserts, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (10). In South Dakota, the “sharp white background” of rural, settler towns dictates Micheaux’s alter egos’ decisions and behaviors. Many of Micheaux’s finest critics, however, argue loftily that Micheaux’s West was relatively free of racism. In his essay “The Plow and the Pen,” for example, Allmendinger makes the egalitarian assertion that Micheaux “expanded the [Western] myth to include racial minorities as representative figures in the process of Manifest Destiny” (549). Johnson, meanwhile, posits that “The South Dakota frontier serves as a place where Micheaux hopes black manhood can be reconstituted, where the hard-working African American man can be free from the racism that restricts his ability to succeed” (70). And Moos, as we saw earlier, insists that Micheaux’s “frontier is raceblind” (53). I concede that South Dakota did not carry the historical baggage of slavery nor enable the still-desperate social—and economic—conditions of the Reconstruction Era, and while these readings of Micheaux certainly have some merit, I contend that once in South Dakota as an arrivant colonist, race figures largely in Micheaux’s increasing and accelerating negotiations of that knife edge between civilized and uncivilized.

Moreover, in South Dakota, we see Micheaux pivot from a preoccupation with appearing merely civilized, as he attempted to do in his early enterprises, to appearing civilizing to his settler neighbors, which in turn affects not only his ability to speculate but also his entire homesteading effort.

The immense, ideological machinery of the American western expansionist project is grounded in whiteness and exclusion. The incalculable, ideological weight of the various strands of American expansionism, ranging from policy enacted by the federal government and by territorial and state governments, to Wister’s The Virginian (1903) and other popular culture
offerings, to Turner’s Frontier Thesis, to Presidential whistlestop tours, to magazine articles, to fantasies of a Manifest Destiny, and to countless boosters’ vigorous efforts, stems from its unwavering, unified message: *that white settlers have a eugenic entitlement to transform wild, western lands into productive country.* Consider, for instance, the Euro-centrism in Turner’s assumption about the settler colonists’ origins: “The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought . . . Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe . . . The fact is that here is a new product that is American” (Taylor 5). Turner’s long-winded point here involves his assertion that the frontier shapes American character, but his off-handed assumption that “the colonist” is Northern European reifies the white supremacy of western expansionist thought. And these assumptions of entitlement crop up frequently in literary works by other South Dakota writers, as we see in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *The Long Winter* (1940), in which Almanzo Wilder, who is getting ready to go search for wheat to save the starving town of De Smet during the disastrous winter of 1880-81, flippantly tells his brother in response to his protestations, “You tell ‘em you had nothing to say about it, Roy . . . I’m free, white, and twenty-one” (258). Almanzo can apparently do whatever he wants on the Dakota prairie, but Oscar Micheaux has no such entitlement.

Instead, Micheaux’s alter egos have to tiptoe along that knife edge and try to convince the white settlers through these constant negotiations that he is a good, civilizing, nonthreatening Black man who deserves their respect so people don’t try to cheat him, and so they won’t try to run him out of town. In *The Conquest*, for instance, Devereaux *does* get cheated at first when he buys lame horses due to his inexperience in horse trading, but he turns this into an example of perseverance, which the settlers admire. His bad purchases become a town joke initially; after
getting utterly ripped off in this horse sale, Devereaux is accosted by a local horse trader on the street, who tells him, “I would have sold you that team of mine for twenty-five dollars less’n I offered ‘em, if the gol-darn grafter hadn’t of come to me’n said ‘give me twenty-five dollars and I will see that the coon buys the team’” (76). Devereaux remains very calm during this exchange, responding only with “Stung, by cracky,” and excuses himself (76). He never makes a public spectacle or even complains about being swindled. Although Devereaux realizes he has been written off as a mark, he also knows he can’t do without animals to break the ground, so he tries his hand at horse trading again and upgrades to mules. Not knowing anything about mules either, he buys ornery, aged mules, but he makes do and eventually impresses the locals with his perseverance in breaking his land with these uncooperative creatures. His efforts, in turn, greatly impresses the settlers and help to establish his good reputation:

When I broke out one hundred and twenty acres with such an outfit as I had, as against many other real farmers who had not broken over forty acres, with good horses and their knowledge of breaking prairie . . . I began to be regarded in a different light. At first I was regarded as an object of curiosity, which changed to appreciation, and later admiration. I was not called a free-go-easy coon, but a genuine booster for Calias (Dallas, South Dakota] and the Little Crow [the Rosebud Reservation]. (The Conquest 98-99)

Devereaux’s perseverance earns the grudging respect of the settlers, which is no small feat since they had initially dismissed him as someone who would not last long out there on the plains. And building his reputation certainly had its benefits, enabling Devereaux to acquire another 160 acres of land for a fair price when another speculator decides to sell his daughter’s claim: “I had been on my claim just about a year, when one day Rattlesnake Jack’s father came from his home on the Jim River and sold me her homestead for three thousand dollars. My dreams were at last
realized, and I had become the owner of three hundred and twenty acres of land” (The Conquest 100). This man came to Devereaux first, was respectful, and did not try to swindle him.

Furthermore, throughout the first half of The Conquest, Devereaux becomes so good at assessing land that his good reputation flowers into his status as a local booster, and here, too, we see Micheaux making calculated decisions to not only endorse the Rosebud but also to further establish his good, civilizing reputation. He becomes the area expert and other speculators escort their potential clients to him to hear him pontificate. Micheaux writes, “instead of being nervous over meeting me, the dealers would drive into the yard or into the fields, and as I liked to talk, introduce the prospective buyers to me and we would engage in a long conversation at times” (138). Devereaux has established such credibility and such a sterling reputation that his opinion becomes a valuable commodity in and of itself. But in order to maintain this newfound status, Devereaux must make those constant, split-second calculations, tell the buyer what he thinks they need to hear, draw upon his own experiences to tailor the conversation to apply to their circumstances, and at the same time, not disappoint the other, visiting speculator. Devereaux continues, “I might add that exaggerated tales were current, which related how I had run as a P---n porter, saved my money, come to the Little Crow, bought a half section, and was getting rich” (138). Micheaux admits here that his alter ego Devereaux embellishes these stories, but he feels that these tales of success are precisely what both he and the other speculator—though perhaps not the unwitting buyer—desire from this situation. Here Devereaux continues to enhance his civilizing, respectable reputation by pitching himself as a local success story, and as we have seen, for Micheaux, financial success functions as the marker of civilization.

But walking this knife edge and carefully constructing this civilizing reputation has steep costs for Micheaux’s alter egos, particularly their romantic relationships with women as well as
social isolation. In South Dakota, as I note earlier, each of Micheaux’s prairie trilogy novels feature his alter egos falling in love with a white woman, and in *The Conquest* and *The Homesteader*, he gives them up so as to maintain his civilizing reputation. In *The Conquest*, Micheaux gives a rougher version of the story, and he refers to his love interest only as the “Scotch Girl.” Oscar Devereaux becomes very frightened when he realizes he is in love with her, realizing how uncivilized their relationship would look to the white settlers:

> Now during that time I had lived among the white people, I had kept my place as regards custom, and had been treated with every courtesy and respect; had been referred to in the local papers in the most complimentary terms, and was regarded as one of the Little Crow’s best citizens. But when the reality of the situation dawned on me, I became in a way frightened, for I did not by any means want to fall in love with a white girl. (155)

If he were to continue to court the Scotch Girl, Devereaux realizes, he jeopardizes his very future in South Dakota. Having just acquired all of that land, such an unsavory outcome to this scenario would be unthinkable. And in this telling of the story, although he claims he is in love with her, Micheaux blames his own distaste for interracial marriage for the relationship’s failure but still spends several lines faulting social mores and laws against interracial marriage. The situation, he decides, is hopeless: “I hated to give up her kindness and friendship. I would have given half my life to have her possess just a least bit of negro blood in her veins, but since she did not and could not help it any more than I could help being a negro, I tried to forget it, straightened out my business and took a trip east, bent on finding a wife among my own” (168). Devereaux’s painful, emergency calculation here leads him to give up completely and he flees to Chicago in search of a wife to bring back to South Dakota.
Micheaux revises this story and adds much more dialogue and detail in his more refined novel *The Homesteader*, and in this retelling, he again blasts social mores against interracial marriage and legal roadblocks to it, but he also includes the possibility of scandal: people in town are already raising their eyebrows at Jean Baptiste’s budding relationship with the Scotch Girl, named Agnes Stewart in this book. When local scoundrel Bill Prescott proposes to Agnes and she turns him down, Bill erupts, arguing with her father about Jean Baptiste and Agnes. He shouts at Jack Stewart, “I’m a white man, I am. And what white man would want a gal that a nigger is allowed to hang aroun’ and court!” (128). Agnes’s father is taken aback because he thought Agnes and Jean were only friends, and also because it enrages him to hear Jean insulted with a racial slur. And although he quickly shakes off his surprise, Bill’s uncalled-for outburst does indicate that the people of Gregory are gossiping about Jean and Agnes. Jean Baptiste is not present for this exchange but hears about it, and with his reputation at stake, he makes that same, sad calculation:

What had passed was the most natural thing in the world, true; and to them it had come because it was in them to assert themselves, but now before him rose the Custom of the Country, and its law. So vital is this Custom; so much is it a part of the body politic that certain states have went on record against it. (145)

Here, even more emphatically than in *The Conquest*, Micheaux underscores the direness of the situation and predicts that continuing this interracial courtship would have terrible consequences. And again, he abandons the idea and heads east in search of a wife: “So Jean Baptiste was going. He would forget Agnes. He would court one in his own race. So to Chicago he now sped” (147). Continuing on with Agnes, he decides, would surely and irreversibly knock him off of the delicate knife edge between civilizing and uncivilizing that he constantly treads. At the end of
the book, Micheaux revises *The Conquest*’s bitter and abrupt end to this relationship with Jean Baptiste’s discovery that Agnes has Black ancestry after all, but despite this happier ending, Baptiste still reels from this loss for much of the novel.4

And even beyond romantic relationships, Micheaux’s Booker T. Washingtonian efforts to identify and not transgress what he thinks is his proper social station means, as an arrivant colonist in rural South Dakota, that he must endure social isolation. Micheaux’s alter egos spend much of the latter part of all three Dakota novels in or en route to or from Chicago, embroiled in various dramas which usually involve his Black wife and her minister father, but in South Dakota, Oscar Devereaux, Jean Baptiste, and Martin Eden are painfully alone. For example, early in *The Conquest*, after Devereaux gets swindled in that initial horse purchase and excuses himself from that exchange in the street with the horse trader, he has no one to vent to and help to sort out the matter, and loneliness envelops him. Micheaux writes, “The sun was nearly down and a cold east wind was whooping it up at about sixty miles an hour, chilling me to the marrow. The fact that I was a stranger in a strange land, inhabited wholly by people not my own race, did not tend to cheer my gloomy spirits” (77). He suffers alone, in private, with no community to boost his flagging spirits and dimming enthusiasm. And that community never materializes; although he is respected and thought of as a booster for the area, Devereaux is never truly considered one of Gregory’s founding fathers, a dubious and arrogant settler honor to be sure, but one that he covets. He remains alone, and despite his attempts at Washingtonian racial uplift and having written dozens of letters to try to entice Black people to come to the Rosebud, no one does—not even to come look at it. His neighbors, “among them being Swedes, Norwegians, Assyrians from Jerusalem, many Austrians, some Hungarians, and lots of Germans and Irish, these last being mostly American born, and also many Russians,” all receive visitors, but
Devereaux does not (194). Micheaux mourns the fact that “This was my fifth year and still there had not been a colored person on my land . . . My white neighbors had many visitors from their old homes and but few had visitors at some time to see them and see what they were doing” (194). His adherence to this brutal, socially constructed, racial hierarchy makes him terribly lonely, and what is more, the hierarchy itself quite possibly deters other potential Black homesteaders from even paying an investigatory visit.

Micheaux’s Representational Anxieties about His Settler Colonial Adjacency

The knife edge Micheaux negotiates, therefore, suggests that for him, the South Dakota frontier is hardly “raceblind,” as Moos suggests (53). Glaringly apparent and inescapable, the settlers’ racial hierarchies present obstacles for Micheaux’s alter egos every moment of every day, reaffirming his arrivant status with each negotiation. And at the same time, Micheaux can see exactly who he displaced; unlike the Cherokee, the Lakota people have not been forced onto a desperate, thousand-mile walk to unfamiliar lands. They are right there, confined to their Rosebud allotments. I have already pointed out some passages in which Micheaux disparages what he dismisses as their poor speculating skills, and now I want to delve more deeply into his anxieties about his participation in arrivant colonialism. These representational anxieties are unique to Micheaux and his arrivant homesteader novels; most settler narratives, on the other hand, have no such qualms about encroaching upon Native lands. In fact, most homesteading narratives share a pronounced, prideful sense of doing one’s part to help the nation expand and thrive, and in South Dakota literature, we see this theme emerge in the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder and O.E. Rölvaag. And in the context of actually settling upon reservation land opened to settlement by the Dawes Act—just as Micheaux does—I want to briefly consider an especially telling passage in Edith Eudora Kohl’s Land of the Burnt Thigh (1938). Here Kohl valorizes
national expansion in her representation of the post-Dawes land rush near Pierre, South Dakota. After describing the general excitement surrounding the hubbub at the Pierre land office during the “Lower Brulé Opening” of reservation land, Kohl pridefully philosophizes—and echoes Frederick Jackson Turner—that:

Our attitude toward the land is particular to America. The European conception of a plot of ground on which a family is rooted for generations has little meaning for people who move by the thousands onto untamed acres, transform it into plowed fields and settlements and towns, and move on endlessly to plow new fields. This constantly renewed search for fresh pastures has kept the country vital, just as the existence of its Western Public Lands has kept it democratic. For its endurance the American spirit owes much to the frontier. (Kohl, ch. 4)

Kohl’s proud, celebratory sense of helping to develop the country shows absolutely zero regret about the settlers usurping treaty lands; needless to say, like Wilder and Rölvaag, her work contains not a whit of textual anxiety about displacing Lakota and Dakota people.

And while such textual anxieties in South Dakota literature are particular to his books, Micheaux’s unease is very subtle, overlooked even by his finest critics, and this is probably partly due to the quotidian nature of settler-Native interactions at this point in time. Unlike earlier settlers’ representations, Micheaux’s alter egos do not quake openly when they encounter Natives, and for good reason. As a point of contrast, I offer two overt examples of settler histrionics from South Dakota literature, and the participants, when faced with even the idea of an encounter with Natives, completely fall apart. First, in Wilder’s The Long Winter, after an old Native American man tells the white settlers gathered at Harthorn’s store in De Smet that the coming winter will be very long and difficult, Charles “Pa” Ingalls goes home and begins to
prepare accordingly. In doing so, accidentally mentions the encounter to his family. Wilder does not mince words when describing her Ma’s horrified reaction: “‘What Indian?’ Ma asked him. She looked as if she were smelling the smell of an Indian whenever she said the word. Ma despised Indians. She was afraid of them, too” (64). Here we see that Ma’s unfounded fear of Natives, which began in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), has not waned a bit. A former squatter on indigenous land in Kansas, Ma survives several interactions with Natives there, and Wilder alludes to Ma’s history of overreaction during those encounters with her inclusion of fear in her explanation of Ma’s response in Dakota Territory. And we see a similar, unfounded terror early in O.E. Rölvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927), when a band of Natives pass near Per Hansa’s homestead and he and his family dissolve into panic. Per Hansa shouts at his son, “Hans, run over to Sam’s and tell him what’s up . . . Hurry now!” and then he “turned to Ole. ‘You go and get Old Maria [his rifle]. You’ll find her in the big chest—and something to load her with in the till. Stand the gun and everything just inside the door here . . . And listen’—his face was hard set—‘when I whistle, I want her—but not before! . . . Are you afraid??’” (Rölvaag’s ellipses). Here, too, in this comically overblown reaction, we see settlers positively shake in their boots at the very idea of Natives, whom the government, settler lore, and popular culture has represented as savages to such a degree that it has become an article of faith. But in early twentieth century Gregory, South Dakota, the quaking settlers belong to the past, and the sight of a Lakota person has become part of everyday life.

However, because of his arrivant status, compounded by the fact that he grapples daily with the settlers’ racial hierarchy, Micheaux has plenty of anxiety about Native Americans, and it isn’t because of fear but rather that he can see that he has participated in their displacement. These anxieties are not articulated as such by Micheaux but instead, they appear
representationally in his Dakota novels. And with these anxieties in mind, I circle back to Micheaux’s seeming refusal to acknowledge Native displacement in any meaningful way, and I contend that these anxieties lie at the heart of his representational omissions and sudden shifts to different subjects. Micheaux’s often jolty style is usually considered a liability, with the result that he isn’t generally considered to have much authorial prowess and therefore isn’t taken very seriously as a writer and even as a filmmaker. As Brown puts it, “Like his films, his novels are often roughly hewn and repetitious” (132). Barbara Tepa Lupack goes further in *Literary Adaptations in Black American Cinema* (2002), skewering Micheaux’s first book with her complaint that “*The Conquest* is not a skillful novel: the style is flat and dry, and there is little wit or symbolic imagery in the writing” (111). Most Micheaux critics, in fact, apparently thinking that they don’t have much to work with stylistically, give up and instead attempt to explain the seeming oddity of a Black pioneer and thus they deny Micheaux a substantive literary critique. But by taking Micheaux seriously and reading a handful of key passages closely, we can see Micheaux’s arrivant anxieties emerge not only in certain lines in his avoidance of exploring certain topics, particularly the reservation, but also in the text *surrounding* those lines, by which I mean his abrupt and frequent shifts to different subjects whenever he mentions Native displacement or alludes to settler colonial structures.

I want to preface Micheaux’s representational avoidances and sudden shifts in his Dakota trilogy by pointing out an interesting moment in *The Forged Note*, in which Mildred, Sydney Wyeth’s love interest, seems to idly imagine settlement in South Dakota. Far from the Western frontier in the American South, and doubly removed by his offering this moment via a character that is not his alter ego, Micheaux makes it clear that he fully understands the consequences of western expansion. While waiting for Sydney, Mildred first picks up a map of South Dakota with
his beloved Rosebud Country labeled, and then his book, and she pictures South Dakota’s frontier origin story, which includes the following, crucial passage:

She saw this land as it was when the country was young; when the bison and the native Indian held sway; when mighty herds roamed across those plains, molested little by the red man. She picked up the book and read a little more. For scores of years they had lived and died, and at the end of this regime, came the inevitable white man, the greatest race of conquerors the world has ever known, without a doubt. And behold the change of a few short years! Nature in wild profusion, then materialism in the extreme. They, these conquerors, had almost changed the world. *(The Forged Note, ch. 4)*

Through Mildred, Micheaux imagines a pre-Contact Plains culture in all three independent clauses of that first, two-semicolon sentence, and he also underscores their dependence on bison. This is important because in his Dakota novels, in the disparaging lines I pointed out earlier in which he implies that they are not good speculators, Micheaux suggests that their failure to develop the land was one of their problems. In this passage, however, he acknowledges their harmony with the undeveloped Plains and its keystone species, which gave them sustenance, clothing, tools, fuel, blankets, ceremonial objects, and more. And in the third sentence, although he mistakenly abridges their history by several centuries, Micheaux does attempt to show that history as well-established, and moreover, he announces the arrival of white settlers, and the subsequent end of life as the Lakotas knew it. His interesting choice of adjectives here, the “inevitable white man,” suggests a sympathetic and almost-resigned tenor, with Micheaux and his ancestors, too, having experienced the effects of imperialist ideology, and he emphasizes his acknowledgement of settler colonialism here with his inclusion of the word “conquerors.” And in his calling attention to the drastic ecological transformation and degradation caused by white
settlement, Micheaux sets up not a simple nature / culture binary opposition, but rather a very specific dichotomy that pits profligate nature against extreme materialism, and he repeats the word “conquerors” again, for emphasis and perhaps even to representationally capitulate to them so that they can negotiate that liminal space between nature and materialism, as conquerors are wont to do. Micheaux, therefore, has a very keen awareness of settler colonialism’s human and ecological costs, and he makes that clear in this passage, with its authorial distance doubly removed from Gregory, South Dakota by geography and by Mildred’s point of view. From this far-off vantage, it seems, Micheaux feels safe enough to let his representational guard down.

But in the Dakota novels, Micheaux’s anxieties about settler colonialism and his arrivant complicity emerge whenever “Indians,” the reservation, or how the land opened for settlement surfaces in the narrative, and one of the markers of these representational anxieties are his brief mentions of these subjects and refusals to elaborate whenever they arise. Consider, for instance, the revised version of *The Homesteader*’s decidedly unromantic proposal scene in *The Wind from Nowhere*, in which Micheaux’s alter ego Martin Eden tries to get Linda to file on a claim in South Dakota and then marry him. Martin explains an opportunity that has recently arisen, quickly mentions how the land came to be opened, and then immediately drops the subject:

> Meanwhile, an opportunity developed to acquire three more farms, [and] I can only acquire them by acting now. The same opportunity will not be possible six months from now—not even two months from now. It is government land, *taken over by the government from the Indians*, and under a certain set-up, I have secured an option to three of these so-called quarters, or 16-acre tracts. (148, my emphasis)

In this passage, Martin mentions very briefly why this land has become open for settlement and does not elaborate further. This seems like a very curious dropping of the subject since Linda
showed considerable interest in Natives earlier in the book, when they first met and she learned he came from South Dakota. In that scene, she had recoiled at the idea of his living among who she imagined to be savages, protesting that “But I think I’d be afraid to live up there—at least by myself as you say you do, no colored people either. Some of those Indians may be tame, but—” (86). Therefore, it seems that Linda might appreciate further elaboration about the government’s taking the land in this proposal, but it never comes. Immediately after this brief mention, Martin continues prattling away, trying to woo Linda with the nuts and bolts of the Homestead Act and this apparently phenomenal chance for land speculation. He presses on, explaining that “Under a decree these lands have to be homesteaded and improved upon. Every American citizen over 21 years old, a woman, if single, may enter on and claim a 160 acre tract” (148). While Martin might have been a bit nervous since he was proposing, as unromantic as even this revised version of this moment may be, we can also detect his anxiety about settler colonialism and his possible complicity in it in his refusal to explain that takeover in more detail. As Veracini puts it, “policy in settler colonial settings is crucially dedicated to enable settlers,” and in this particular circumstance, government policy can clearly benefit arrivant colonists as well (43). And as we have seen, Micheaux is very aware of the consequences of settler colonial conquest, but he resolutely refuses to take it up in this scene.

We see a similar representational unease throughout The Homesteader, and here, too, Micheaux’s anxieties become evident in his hasty subject changes and steadfast refusals to elaborate. In this book, arguably the most refined version of the story, Micheaux begins that aforementioned chapter “When the Indians Shot the Town up,” with the story of Gregory’s founding, and here, too, he broaches the subject of settler colonialism and immediately shies away from it:
Now the promoters, because the Railroad Company owned considerable land where the tracks left the valley to ascend to the highland, contended that it was the purpose of the railroad to split the trade country by coming up the valley, and that was why the town had been located where it was, *on a piece of land that had once belonged to an Indian*. There were three other towns, platted by the government along a route that did not strike Dallas. (43, my emphasis)

Micheaux continues with his description of the railroad line, the town itself, and several white settler characters for several pages after this settler colonial, textual hit-and-run, only after he has established just how civilized the town was does he interrupt the tranquility with the drunken Lakotas approaching to shoot up the town.

In this passage, Micheaux’s locating Gregory “on a piece of land that had once belonged to an Indian” and then hastily continuing on with his explanation of the railroad and the town itself points to his unease about Native displacement and with the town’s white, founding fathers that he describes in detail just three paragraphs later. That group of founders is certainly an arrogant title for them to claim while the boards on their new buildings on Native land were still warping. As Veracini puts it, “The settler foreclosure of indigenous presences enables and potentiates the narcissism that presupposes the decision to ‘remove’ to an ‘empty’ frontier” (37). The narcissistic men who started the bank and the lumberyard, “whose reputations were rather notorious,” as well as the “beliquored” doctor and “weazened” postmaster, found that this frontier, of course, was far from empty, and yet they established their town anyway (44). And while Micheaux’s principles of inclusion spurred him to mention the land’s previous, indigenous “owner,” he does not explain further and drops the subject entirely, not to take it up again. As for Micheaux’s use of the singular “Indian” rather than the plural form in that passage’s crucial
dependent clause, I can only surmise that since his own land was made available by the Dawes Act, he must have been referring to a post-Dawes, Native head of a household as the nameless “owner” since Gregory was not founded until 1908.

I want to analyze a third and final instance of Micheaux’s anxious, hasty subject changes, this one from the much rougher text *The Conquest*, to further underscore his discomfort with settler colonialism and Native displacement, and to add yet another layer to his arrivant colonist’s discomfort with the suggestion that some of Micheaux’s unease may have stemmed from his writing for what he may have imagined as primarily white audience. In *The Conquest*, Devereaux the arrivant-speculator is surrounded by settler-speculators, and he includes the modifier “dead” in his explanation of previous landowners. He writes:

The spirit of unrest that seem to pervade the atmosphere of the community was not altogether the desire to have and to hold, but more, to buy and to sell. Homesteads were sold in Megory [Gregory] county and the proceeds were immediately reinvested in Tipp [Tripp County], where considerable dead Indian land could be purchased at half the price. (137, my emphasis)

As we saw in the previous two passages I have pointed out, here, too, Micheaux mentions Natives and hastily changes the subject. In this example, he discusses speculation, mentions Native Americans and their land, and quickly moves on, in this case to a discussion of how automobiles were becoming popular: “At about that time the auto fever began to infect the restless and over-prosperous settlers, and business men alike. That was the day of the many two-cylinder cars. They made a dreadful noise but they moved and moved faster than horses” (137). But his seemingly callous inclusion of the adjective “dead” in the previous sentence lingers, unexplained, and with *The Conquest*’s publication history in mind, in which Micheaux sold
preorders of copies to his white settler neighbors, we could read this odd passage as his possible, anxious pandering to his settler readers. That adjective “dead,” although the Lakotas are right there on nearby allotments on Rosebud, aligns with one of the ultimate aims and methods of settler colonialism: genocide. And if Micheaux did not intend that adjective to be read that way and is only referring to it in terms of temporality and the demise of one of his Lakota neighbors’ ancestors, he is at least making a rhetorical suggestion that those days are long past. This gesture, too, would probably appeal to its settler readers since it would, as Byrd puts it, “relegate American Indians to the site of already-doneness” (Byrd, ch. 1).

Either way, Micheaux exposes his own arrivant colonist’s discomfort with this curious inclusion couched within his sudden subject changes, and he also taps into a powerful settler unease. As Byrd points out, “Paranoid patriarchal white sovereignty manages its anxiety over dispossession and threat through a pathological relationship to indigenous sovereignty. In the United States, the Indian is the original enemy combatant who cannot be grieved” (Byrd, introduction). Here Byrd deploys Butler’s notion of grievability in a settler colonial context, underscoring the settler perception of Natives as subhuman. As Butler muses in *Precarious Life* (2004):

> Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and what kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (xiv-xv).

By thinking about settler colonialism through the lenses of Byrd’s and Butler’s notions of grievability, then, we can conclude that the deaths of Native Americans caused by American western expansionism and its settler ideologies do not count as grievable deaths. Micheaux’s
seemingly callous or flippant inclusion, therefore, dehumanizes Natives and would thus likely appeal to his imagined—and anxious—homesteader readership, who are subsidizing his book’s publication. And as an outsider, constantly shoved to the margins, his own unease as an arrivant colonist becomes legible in this passage since again, he quickly changes the subject to something more palatable: early twentieth century cars, with their two cylinders and terrible racket.

And with the possibility of Micheaux’s thinking about his settler audience—at least for The Conquest—in mind, I want to consider a final, curious, and complex rhetorical move Micheaux makes, which I mentioned earlier in this chapter: whenever Micheaux mentions the word *reservation* in that book, it often functions only as a geographical descriptor. With the exception of the passage that I pointed to in my discussion of his speculator’s assumption that the Lakotas are wealthy because of their seemingly vast land ownership, Micheaux limits his usage of *reservation* in The Conquest to indicate geography, development, and speculation opportunities. He never takes up the Rosebud’s status as a federally-imposed, settler colonial enclosure for the Lakota people, and here, too, his arrivant anxiety leaches into the text and manifests representationally. In fact, Micheaux’s uneasy, authorial exclusions and avoidances appear to give the word *reservation* an entirely new signification. Consider, for example, Micheaux’s opening lines to his chapter “The Surveyors,” in which, still believing the Department of Interior’s claims about rainfall and soil composition, he gushes about the area’s potential:

*The entire Little Crow [Rosebud] reservation consisted of about two million acres of land, four-fifths of which was unopened and lay west of Megory County. Of the two million acres, perhaps one million, five hundred thousand ranged from fair to the richest of loamed soil, underlaid with clay. The climatic condition is such that all kinds of crops*
grown in the central west, can be grown here. Two hundred miles north, corn will not mature; two hundred miles south, spring wheat is not grown; two hundred west, the altitude is too high to insure sufficient rainfall to produce a crop; but the reservation lands are in such a position that winter wheat, spring wheat, oats, rye, corn, flax, and barley do well. (94, *The Conquest*, my emphasis)

Micheaux continues on enthusiastically about settlement and railroads and development in this chapter, casually using the word *reservation* to signify geography and never stopping to mention the Lakotas or to consider why the remainder of the reservation might be “unopened” to settlers. It may be that in this case, too, Micheaux was trying to please his settler audience and thus adopting an idealistic, settler stance that vanishes Natives and erroneously suggests the Lakotas’ “already-doneness,” to borrow Byrd’s phrase.

Yet Micheaux’s cold, geographical signifier doesn’t offer any typical, settler tales of victimized homesteaders bravely vanquishing the savages. There are no empty, deluded brags of victorious conquest in his mentions of the *reservation*, no overblown, masculinity-constructing stories of Western heroics. His speculator’s sense of land and capitalism might underpin this peculiar, removed usage, perhaps, but at the same time, as we have seen in his other authorial avoidances, his arrivant’s anxiety likely emerges here as well. Micheaux’s alter egos, as I suggested in my discussion of the knife edge they must negotiate in order to appear civilizing, must constantly tiptoe around the white settlers and live their lives relegated to the margins. As an arrivant, he isn’t really at home on the Rosebud; as Veracini points out, “settlers move to their country,” but Micheaux’s alter ego Oscar Devereaux must somehow figure out how to live in the settlers’ vision of South Dakota as well (42). Micheaux’s tiptoeing around the subject of the reservation and essentially having to redefine it, then, points to his uneasiness with the settler
project. As geographer Tim Cresswell puts it in *Place: An Introduction* (2015), “Home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness. Home, more than anywhere else, is seen as a center of meaning and a field of care” (39). In South Dakota, Devereaux does *not* feel safe or a sense of attachment; instead, he operates from a place of arrivant precarity, always having to tiptoe along that knife edge. This strange resignification of *reservation* in *The Conquest* contrasts wildly with Sydney Wyeth’s intense, repetitive romanticizations of the Rosebud in *The Forged Note*, and again, in that book set in the South and endowed with the safety brought on by geographical distance, Micheaux offers lines that he apparently thought would never work in his Dakota novels. In a fit of nostalgia, for example, Sydney tells Mildred, “I want to go home. I want to go home to stay. I don’t like it here; I don’t like it anywhere, but in the Rosebud Country” (*The Forged Note*, ch. 11). There are no such moments of vehement attachment or a sense of place or belonging in *The Conquest*; instead, Oscar Devereaux continues to walk his tenuous knife edge, explaining the reservation without describing its purpose.

In this chapter, I have sought to examine the instabilities in Oscar Micheaux’s arrivant colonist project, and to parse its various strands that appear in his Dakota trilogy of *The Conquest, The Homesteader*, and *The Wind from Nowhere*. As an arrivant, Micheaux’s Western experience was far from monolithic—Black enclaves in Kansas, Jewish homesteaders in North Dakota, Basque settlers in Nevada, Chinese laborers in California, and countless other groups all had very different experiences within the Western expansionist project. While one of many, Micheaux’s particular story—in all of its incarnations—is of vital importance to Great Plains and South Dakota literature because it decenters the dominant, European settler narrative while also highlighting a wide range of issues including potential arrivant complicity and anxieties, racism
and flight from Jim Crow laws, conditions of precarity, marginalization in the West, and the irresistible pull of expansionist ideology. While Micheaux is but one participant in South Dakota’s settler colonial “cacophony” of narratives, to borrow Byrd’s term for “discordant and competing representations of diasporic arrivals and native lived experiences,” his subaltern voice, a cacophonous collection of philosophies, patterns, themes, and anxious withholdings in its own right, remains crucial, offering his unique, “lone wolf” speculator of color’s personal vision of what the West meant in his imagination (Byrd, preface; Micheaux The Wind 66).

As for Lawrence and Dua’s inflammatory argument concerning whether people of color should be considered settlers, the question of Micheaux’s complicity in the settler colonial structure in early twentieth century South Dakota remains without a definitive answer, and in the grand sweep of Western American history, ultimately may not be a broad enough—or stern enough—question to ask. If Micheaux is complicit in settler colonialism, it is through the coercion of American imperialism rather than as settling as “a mode of domination,” as Veracini puts it (102). To be sure, Micheaux and his thinly-veiled alter egos participate in settlement and displace the Lakota people but do so to escape oppressive, Jim Crow-era conditions of precarity in Illinois. Micheaux reinvents himself as an opportunist, or to use Wallace Stegner’s more colorful Western term, a boomer, using land speculation as one of the few available avenues of success. As Byrd reminds us: “If colonialism has forced the native to ‘cathect the space of the Other on his home ground,’ as Spivak tells us, then imperialism has forced settlers and arrivants to cathect the space of the native as their home” (Byrd, ch. 5). American imperialist ideologies and ruthless conditions of systemic precarity stuck indefinitely on repeat, according to Byrd, are ultimately to blame for this staggeringly bleak lack of choices. Furthermore, we can sense by page 100 of The Conquest that Oscar Devereaux, despite the promising opportunities for
acquiring more land, probably won’t stick around in Gregory for long; the knife edge he must constantly walk while there becomes increasingly difficult to negotiate, his loneliness deepens further with the passage of time, and his trips to Chicago become more frequent; the arrivant thus becomes an absentee. In this sobering light, we could interpret Micheaux’s title *The Conquest* as his veiled admission that as an arrivant-speculator, it is Oscar Devereaux who is conquered, by the crushing forces of American imperialism and its ruthless, settler colonial structure.
The Homestead Act of 1862 provided, as Richard White succinctly puts it, “160 acres of free land to any settler who paid a small filing fee and resided on and improved the land for five years” (143). The Act was eminently exploitable by speculators, as the actions of Micheaux and his fellow Gregoryites suggest, and sparked land rushes all over the Great Plains and American West.

While the Homestead Act legally enabled the great hordes of settlers headed west, the Dawes Act of 1887, also known as the General Allotment Act, had equally grave implications for Indian Country since it called for communally-owned Native lands to be broken up into 160-acre allotments for settlement by Natives, while surplus land was to be sold to U.S. citizens. The Dawes Act enabled further encroachment upon indigenous lands, as we see in Micheaux’s books, and also broke up traditional, extended Native families, known in Lakota as tiospaye. As Walter L. Hixson explains, “The patently ethnocentric policy undermined Indian culture and community, including a direct assault on the family . . . Theodore Roosevelt accurately described allotment as ‘a mighty pulverizing engine to break up the tribal mass’” (142). When Micheaux refers to Gregory being situated “a piece of land that once belonged to an Indian,” I believe he refers to a post-Dawes, nuclear family allotment since he uses the singular form (The Homesteader 43).

The 1906 Burke Act amended the Dawes Act and further disenfranchised Native Americans by linking citizenship and forced assimilation to land ownership. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society, “The law withheld citizenship until the end of the twenty-five year trust period or until the allottee received a fee patent from the secretary of the interior. It further stated that any Indian who had taken up residence apart from the tribe and who had ‘adopted the habits of civilized life’ was declared a citizen and was entitled to all the rights, privileges, and immunities of citizenship” (“Burke Act”).

Though not as much of a “lone wolf” as he might have us think, Micheaux remains a bit of an anomaly in South Dakota for several reasons: he is alone and despite his utopian fantasy at the close of The Wind from Nowhere, Micheaux seems content to participate in racial uplift as a shining but faraway example to Black people in the East and South (The Wind 66). Also, in a literary context, Micheaux is unique since he left behind a paper trail of autobiographical novels with laborious homesteading efforts by a Black man at their locus. There is no figure quite like him in South Dakota literature; his books outline his steadfast commitment to acquiring land and settling down near Gregory. For a bit of contrast, legendary Black cowboy Nat Love (also known as Deadwood Dick) also spent a bit of time in South Dakota during the 1880s cattle boom and wrote about it sparingly in The Life and Adventures of Nat Love (1907), but ultimately, Love was merely passing through on occasion in his peregrinations of the West and despite his mythology-heavy nickname, thus remains on the periphery of South Dakota literature. And furthermore, Micheaux, having arrived fairly late to homesteading, chronologically speaking, was compelled to settle on the Rosebud Reservation, which offered allotments beginning in 1904, and this, too, makes him an outlier in terms of Black settlement in South Dakota. As Dan Moos postulates, “Micheaux was quite possibly one of the only African Americans attempting to acquire an allotment from the Rosebud Sioux Reservation” (59). That does not, however, mean that there
were no Black people on the Rosebud at all. There were almost certainly some Blacks dwelling nearby, as we see in that interesting moment in *The Conquest* where Oscar Devereaux locks eyes with another man in Gregory and they share a flicker of recognition. This other fellow was one of the Woodrings, a Black family who lived just over the border in Nebraska. The Woodrings, as Micheaux explains, “claimed to be part Mexican, which would account for the darkness of their complexion. But I had seen too many different races, however, to mistake a streak of Ethiopian” (158). The Woodring family, fearing, perhaps, the sort of hierarchical racial suppression that Micheaux faces daily, apparently thought it would be safer to try to pass as Mexican on the Northern Plains.

4 Very late in *The Homesteader*, Jean Baptiste learns that “Agnes’ mother had not been a white woman at all, but in truth was of Ethiopian extraction” (530). Baptiste and Agnes can therefore marry after all. These late discoveries of mixed-blood women passing as white would become a staple in Micheaux’s films as well, and we also see a version of this in *The Wind from Nowhere*. In that book, too, Martin Eden’s love interest Deborah is first represented as white, but Martin discovers that she has a Black ancestor—again, very late in the book—and so he feels he can marry her after all. Deborah is surprised too, telling Martin the story of her discovery: “After while, Grandpa came and asked if I wasn’t Deborah and I said, yes. He was in a shadow and I couldn’t see his face so well. But when he walked into the room and I could see his face closely, I started again, more this time than when I saw the woman [her aunt]—for *my grandpa was colored too!*” (419).

5 Caroline “Ma” Ingalls’s overwhelming fear of Native Americans seems to have really taken hold in *Little House on the Prairie*. There, squatting on Native land in Kansas, she has numerous encounters with them, which Wilder details in the chapters “Indians in the House” and “The Tall Indian,” and Ma also begins to fear the very idea of indigenous people, which Wilder details in the chapters “Indian Camp,” “Indian Jamboree,” and “Indian War-Cry.” Ma’s trepidation manifests not only in her disparaging comments but also in her affective responses, and physically shakes during these encounters. In the chapter “Indian War-Cry,” for example, Wilder writes: “When the war-cry was over, Laura knew it had not got her yet. She was still in the dark house and she was pressed close against Ma. Ma was trembling all over” (293). Ma’s terror of Natives carries over into the other books, and in the Dakota novels, begins to also manifest as disgust, as we see in her wrinkling of her nose at the mention of the Native man in *The Long Winter*. Although Wilder’s books remain enormously popular, scholars have recently begun to push back against her overtly racist representations of Natives, and in 2018, the American Library Service to Children stripped Wilder’s name from a prominent annual award.

6 In his expansive body of work, the lauded Western American writer Wallace Stegner often categorized settlers as either “boomers” or “stickers.” Boomers, in short, participated in an area’s economic boom and then moved on, while stickers, having created a sense of place, stayed there—or were stuck there. In his introduction to his essay collection *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, Stegner proclaims, “[Western hopefulness] is the product not of the boomers but of the stickers, not of those who pillage and run but of those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in” (xxvii). While we might not think of Micheaux as a pillager in the sense that a gold miner or oil industry worker or other extractive, boom participant might be, he does plow up his land and attempt to farm it, which in the larger
context of the Dust Bowl—the largest, American ecological catastrophe of the twentieth century—could technically count as pillaging.
Chapter Two

“God Forbid That They Should Perish”:

Lakota Allyship in Dan O’Brien’s Fiction

In his foundational text *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (1999), Patrick Wolfe makes a famously groundbreaking remark about settler colonialism, claiming that it is a structure rather than an event. This redefinition hinges upon another of his key observations involving temporality’s influence upon settler colonialism. Settler colonialism does not occur as a singular moment in time, but is rather an encroaching structure meant to last, he argues, and thus settler colonialism as a structure is designed for the *longue duree*: “Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies. The split tensing reflects a determinate feature of settler colonization. The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event” (2). Wolfe bluntly identifies settler colonialism’s genocidal aims with this remark, suggesting that rather than exploiting Native populations for labor and economic gains, the settler state seeks to eliminate them outright, and at the same time, Wolfe’s parenthetical positioning of “(are)” following his “were” gestures toward the persistence of—and relentlessly recurring iterations of—the settler colonial project. Lorenzo Veracini addresses this remarkably durable matrix of seemingly solution-less problems in *The Settler Colonial Present* (2015), particularly in his chapter “Settler Colonialism Is Not Finished,” pointing out that in a settler situation, decolonization becomes very difficult, if not outright impossible, and wide acceptance of the vastly complex settler state of affairs results in a lack of willingness to even broach the subject. In an American context, a decolonized American West becomes nearly impossible to imagine. Ordering white settlers’ descendants to suddenly pull stakes and decamp from Boise,
Tucson, Las Vegas, Laramie, or any other Western settlement would result in ridicule at best and at worst, further bloodshed.

As scholars of settler colonialism are quick to point out, there is no easy path to reconciliation either, and the United States is no exception. Here in the U.S., the will or need to reconcile seems virtually non-existent—fueled, perhaps, by the American frontier myth, a cherry-picked, whitewashed, and sorely lacking high school history curriculum, and a hearty dose of denial. Yet Veracini opines in his book *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010) that reconciliation might be possible *without* scattering the masses to the winds:

Does a post-settler dispensation require that settlers should be turned into refugees? I do not think so. If conquest and movement make settlers, decolonization should lie in *undoing conquest*, not in the production of further displacement. Interdependency is the opposite of foreclosure, and it is settler colonialism that actively produces refugees, not decolonization. (*The Settler* 103, my emphasis)

Veracini, however, remains firmly entrenched in his theorizations, and leaves imagining what “undoing conquest” might actually look like to his readers.¹ For our purposes here with South Dakota and specifically South Dakota literature, I am interested, broadly, in what “undoing conquest” might look like in this rural, settler state with a long history of brutally horrific acts against Native Americans. Was the name change from Harney Peak to Black Elk Peak a respectable beginning to an undoing of conquest? Would land acknowledgements on state and federal government property, including public universities, state parks, and national parks (particularly South Dakota’s iconic Mount Rushmore National Memorial) help? And how could we begin to mitigate the micro- and macro-aggressions against Natives by the state, its police
departments, its legislators, and its governor? And finally, how can we confront racism and anti-Native biases, so deeply embedded in our state’s cultural imaginary?

While I do not possess concrete answers to these important questions, I pose them anyway because I contend that they must be asked, meditated upon, and perhaps, left to smolder awhile in all of their complexities, ramifications, and possibilities before we can get down to the difficult task of undoing conquest in the settler—and proud of it—state of South Dakota. I broach this problem by taking an unflinching look at the state’s dominant settler narrative and examining how white, contemporary, South Dakota authors represent Native Americans and ongoing issues of settler colonialism. In this chapter, I interrogate the oeuvre of Dan O’Brien, South Dakota’s second best-known writer after Laura Ingalls Wilder. O’Brien’s body of work, by virtue of popularity, prolificacy, and subject position, is representative of the dominant narrative in South Dakota, and so I trace his fiction’s occasionally bumpy journey toward his complicated allyship with the Lakota people. O’Brien’s troublesome early work omits Native Americans entirely, as we see in Eminent Domain (1987), while in Spirit of the Hills (1988), O’Brien relies heavily upon Native American cultural stereotypes; in that book, he portrays Native men as drunk, mystical, or both, and he Orientalizes and hyper-sexualizes Katie Running, the only female, Lakota character. But beginning with In the Center of the Nation (1991), and especially in his later novels The Contract Surgeon (1999), The Indian Agent (2004), and Stolen Horses (2010), O’Brien’s representations of Native Americans show a gradual pivot to a vexed allyship with Native people. I argue that O’Brien’s later works demonstrate the complexities of ongoing settler colonialism in the New West via his sympathetic portrayals of Lakota characters as well as his depictions of Native issues in his fiction.

**Erasures, Stereotypes, Sympathy, and Settler Colonialism: O’Brien’s Early Fiction**
In the late 1980s, O’Brien galloped into the Great Plains writing scene with the publication of his short story collection *Eminent Domain* in 1987, which had won the Iowa Short Fiction Award the previous year. He set these early stories, already wrought in the spare prose that would become one of his hallmarks, all over the United States but primarily in the Great Plains and interior West, most notably Iowa, Omaha, and Minnesota, as well as upon the notoriously dangerous North Face of the Grand Teton in Wyoming. Despite these Midwestern and Western locales, O’Brien, curiously, includes no representations of Native Americans in this book at all; he fails to even mention Native people, or culture, or stolen land, or historic battles, or massacres, or reservations. While O’Brien doesn’t trot out harmful and hollow stereotypes of Native people in this collection, as he does in his first novel *Spirit of the Hills*, *Eminent Domain*’s Anglocentric erasures of Natives position white culture as unquestionably, irrevocably dominant, and further, in the case of the titular story “Eminent Domain,” in which a state highway department reclaims a car junkyard’s property, O’Brien’s fills the vacuum of Native presence with about-to-be displaced white characters, in a disturbing example of Veracini’s assertion that “settler colonialism is not finished” (*The Settler* 68). As a jarring result, this story—and ultimately the entire collection—seeks to reinscribe rather than undo conquest.

As David L. Moore gravely reminds us in *That Dream Shall Have a Name* (2014), “America was built on the vanishing of Indians” (4). In a settler colonial context, this means expulsion and genocide, as Veracini points out: “Where they [settlers] encounter ‘low frontierity’ [high indigenous population] circumstances, settlers routinely consider and, if they can, execute the ‘removal’ or ‘transfer’ (i.e., the forcible expulsion) of the indigenous people they encounter” (*The Settler* 22). In the United States, this widely-accepted notion of the *vanishing Indian* has become a presupposition; both interdisciplinary problem and cultural albatross, it reflects micro-
and macro-shifts and stases in history, anthropology, law, and literature throughout the twentieth
century and into the twenty-first. This attitude endured for decades in various iterations,
undergirding the United States government’s various attempts at managing relations with Native
Americans throughout the Assimilation, Termination, and Self-Determination periods of the
twentieth century.

The folly of this problematic notion, however, is that Native Americans do persist, and
continue to resist settler colonial aims in the United States, as we saw in the Standing Rock
efforts of 2016-7 and in the burgeoning LandBack movement. Native people are far more
resilient than government agencies, lawmakers, Anglocentric historians, and Hollywood
producers would have the public believe. Even now, in 2020, the United States continues to
grapple with this issue; during the Black Lives Matter protests in May 2020, a Columbus statue
outside of the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul was torn down by the American Indian
Movement. Columbus Day remains on the official U.S. calendar, although various states and
municipalities attempt to subvert it in recent years by declaring “Native American Day” or
“Indigenous People’s Day” as a suitable alternative.

The notion of the vanishing Indian has leached into popular American cultural
representations, too, as Jane Tompkins’s recounts in her troubled revelation in her introduction to
West of Everything (1992): “When I sat down to watch Western movies in 1986 . . . I expected to
see a great many Indians . . . But the Indians I expected did not appear. The ones I saw
functioned as props, bits of local color, textural effects. As people they had no existence” (7-8).
Tompkins does allow that literature was slightly more inclusive than Hollywood, but barely.
What Tompkins witnessed when she did spot a rare Native in these films was a set of
backgrounded stereotypes enacted by white actors in redface, placed there to fulfill various
directors’ interpretations of the West. These stereotypes, as I will show with O’Brien’s *Spirit of the Hills*, are deeply problematic in different ways. But in terms of his *Eminent Domain*, we can draw parallels with the rarity of Tompkins’s sightings. The complete and utter omission of Native Americans in O’Brien’s early imagined West suggests not only that Native Americans were and are in the process of vanishing, but that the American settler colonial project succeeded in its aims of displacement and genocide, and that Natives have completely vanished.

In his first novel, O’Brien shifts gears and tries a different tack, but this approach, too, raises a complex set of issues. This book focuses exclusively upon South Dakota and he does not erase Native Americans in *Spirit of the Hills* (1988), set in the fictional Black Hills town of Medicine Springs, but instead O’Brien trots out a number of worn and harmful stereotypes. The Anglocentric plot is part cheesy Western thriller, part C.J. Box-esque mystery: Vietnam veteran Tom McVay goes to the Black Hills to track down his younger brother’s murderer, and crusty local Bill Egan, a skilled trapper brought of out retirement, attempts to track down an enormous—and potentially imagined—wolf that threatens the locals’ livestock. O’Brien includes a number of peripheral Native characters: impossibly patient James Lebeaux, McVay’s Orientalized love interest Katie Running, philosopher-shepherd Joe Standing Elk, and an unruly, AIM-like encampment of unreasonable, radical activists who occupy a swath of Forest Service land and plan to blow up Mount Rushmore. The detrimental caricatures O’Brien paints reflect popular and misguided perceptions of the Lakota people in the white South Dakotan imaginary: most of the Natives in the book drink copious amounts of alcohol, with the exception of teetotalers Lebeaux and Standing Elk, who instead embody Tonto-esque caricatures as well as the trope of the magical Indian.
O’Brien’s pivot from exclusion and erasure in *Eminent Domain* to these stereotypes in *Spirit of the Hills* reflects a significant bump in the road on his journey to shaky literary allyship with Native people. His later depictions, coupled with his care for bison and grasslands, reveal his development of a broader understanding of and respect for their culture, and his growing sympathies reflect an important step in the larger project of undoing conquest. As Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward explain in *Writing the Other* (2011), “a writer may have other reasons to try to write transculturally: to speak for those unheard at one or another level of discourse; to hitch a ride on some literary bandwagon such as magical realism; *to learn about, understand, sympathize with members of another culture*” (92, my emphasis). Sympathy, I contend, is where O’Brien does eventually arrive in his later work, but his early fiction, particularly *Spirit of the Hills*, remains deeply problematic. Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda grapple with the problem of authorial sympathy in their introduction to *The Racial Imaginary* (2016): “One way to know you’re in the presence of, possessed by—a racial imaginary is to see if the boundaries of one’s imaginative sympathy lines up, again and again, with the lines drawn by power. If the imaginative sympathy of a white writer, for example, shuts off at the edge of whiteness” (17). In *Spirit of the Hills*, O’Brien’s sympathy does appear to shut off at the edge of whiteness, as we see in his relentless deployment of Native caricatures rather than characters.

In this book, O’Brien represents both James Lebeaux and Joe Standing Elk as Lakota versions of Tonto. The Lone Ranger’s sidekick Tonto, too acquiescent to even enact the troublesome noble savage trope, crosses the divide between civilization and savage, offering up a one-dimensional, docile embodiment of the settler acknowledgement that Natives haven’t quite vanished despite the settlers’ best efforts. Vine Deloria, Jr. writes in *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) that “Tonto cemented in the minds of the American public the cherished falsehood that all
Indians were the same—friendly and stupid” (201). Both Lebeaux and Standing Elk are overly patient and exceedingly affable compared to their collective foils, the marauding, AIM-esque encampment of Lakota radicals squatting on Forest Service land. The closest O’Brien comes to showing sympathy or empathy for any Native in the book appears early in the text; after a comical explanation of the tourist industry in the Black Hills, O’Brien writes:

And then there are those whose families have always been there. There are people in the Black Hills who believe that it is the center of the world, that it is a holy place, and that the evil that now takes place there is only temporary. These people see the Black Hills as a good place. It is only in the last one hundred years that the good has slipped away. They mark the beginning of this change to about the time Custer discovered gold in the Hills, about the time the treaties that gave the Hills to them forever were broken. (29)

In this passage, we see O’Brien attempt to grapple with representing settler colonialism, its history, and its persistence. Then, just as we meet James a few sentences later, the sympathy begins to evaporate, leaving the reader with an imperturbable, Lakota Tonto: “James Lebeaux was one of those people. Yet he was not angry. He didn’t hate the white men the way some of the Sioux did. He was a patient man, believed that time would straighten things out, and that violence was not the way of the Hills” (29). Lebeaux’s hope for complete decolonization, first appearing in this passage, crops up periodically in the book, curiously juxtaposed with infinite patience and lack of ire. James tells Katie: “We know where our home is, but still we are lost. Our problem is that right now, for a short time, our home is hostile. But this is where we belong. . . . Your home loves you. If you let the spirit of the hills come inside, the confusion will be gone” (196, my emphasis). James’ optimism about their homeland suggests either a fraught, pseudo-mystical representation of James’ ability to foretell the future, or—more likely—it reflects a
dumbed-down, Tonto-esque misunderstanding of settler colonialism’s relative permanence and loss of Native sovereignty. Also, O’Brien limits white / Native alliances in the book to McVay and Katie’s lusty dalliances, and he portrays the AIM-like encampment on Forest Service land as violent, antiwhite criminals. James’ childlike optimism, then, infantilizes his character since he does not acknowledge the extent of settler colonization. Moreover, his odd statement that “our home is hostile” seems remarkably insufficient in its failure to distinguish between place and conquerer; the settlers’ descendants might be hostile, or the Hills are occupied, but his statement seems to assign culpability to the place itself, which undercuts his semi-mystical, titular statement about “the spirit of the hills” (196).

O’Brien represents the text’s other Tonto-like character, Joe Standing Elk, as even more mystical, and at the same time, he attempts to establish Standing Elk’s authenticity via his mysticism as well as his darker complexion. First, O’Brien reinscribes the dominant settler narrative by pointing to Joe’s Otherness more than once, with white as the default. He does not describe Egan or McVay’s swarthiness or pallor, but when the reader meets Standing Elk, we learn: “He was a full-blood Sioux, a rarity now, very dark-skinned and quiet. Unlike the new Indians, he was not rebellious. He stayed to himself, practiced the old ways, spoke the old language, and believed in magic” (71). In addition to underscoring Standing Elk’s Otherness in this description, O’Brien reinforces Standing Elk’s Tonto-icity deploying the troublesome, mystical Indian trope. As Deloria explains, “although inarticulate to a fault, he [Tonto] occasionally called upon his primitive wisdom to get the Lone Ranger out of a tight spot. Tonto had some indefinable aboriginal knowledge that operated deus ex machina in certain situations” (201). This quality, O’Brien claims, is “magic,” and so are Standing Elk’s spiritual beliefs and practices, which is deeply problematic in terms of dominant, Anglocentric, settler narratives.
Leanne Howe, co-editor of *Seeing Red: Hollywood’s Pixeled Indians* and member of the Choctaw Nation, explains that using this term is a major faux pas, admonishing readers that “I would never, never use the term ‘magic’ in relation to native practices and belief” (Little). Critic Channette Romero goes further, putting it this way in her skewering of the magical realism genre in *Activism and the American Novel* (2012): “A big part of the problem of applying the term ‘magical realism’ to Native work . . . is that it implies that Native reality isn’t real, valid, or even existing, but a figment of someone’s imagination . . . ‘Magical realism’ privileges ‘normative’ reality as the only reality, and everything else has to be untrue, or magical, or imaginary” (37).

By referring to Standing Elk’s cultural practices as magic, then, O’Brien positions settler cultural practices as normative. While O’Brien’s two, stereotypical, Tonto-esque characters—particularly James—straddle the civilization / savage divide, he depicts the other Natives in this book, most notably his representation of McVay’s love interest, Katie Running, as drunken savages. James Lebeaux and Joe Standing Elk are teetotalers, but every other Native American in the novel drinks themselves to oblivion regularly. The AIM-like enclave, brimming with drunken, radical Natives is never positively identified as the American Indian Movement, but O’Brien drops hints throughout the text that gesture emphatically towards AIM and his settler interpretation of their purported savagery. In one scene, we learn that a National Park Service Ranger named Mullens “had several contingency plans for protecting Mount Rushmore in case it was attacked by what he called terrorists. That had seemed funny until the seventies when militant Indians had occupied the foot of the mountain with gallons of paint and acid, ready to deface the heads” (105, my emphasis). AIM was founded by Dennis Banks in 1968, and as we will see in Mary Brave Bird’s recounting of Wounded Knee II, the 1970s were AIM’s heyday. O’Brien also name-drops Minneapolis, where AIM initially began in response to the city’s
notorious police brutality, early in the text in Katie’s explanation for returning to the Hills, and here O’Brien simultaneously positions Katie as a party girl and suggests that AIM is just a bunch of drunken, violent Indians:

   The camp in the Black Hills had seemed a perfect excuse. Though she thought the camp was important, the truth was that she had begun to slide in Minneapolis. It was a rough crowd, and she found herself drinking too much. She lost a couple of jobs and was broke. There was action in the Black Hills, so she hitched a ride with another Indian and came to have a look. (35)

O’Brien clearly means that Katie was hanging out and partying with the American Indian Movement, and her drinking, as well as the drinking taking place in the Hills encampment, undercuts and misconstrues the significance—and aims—of AIM. Mary Brave Bird drank heavily on the Rosebud Reservation, as we saw, and was spared a lifetime of misery by her involvement with AIM. But in O’Brien’s settler colonial novel, his overtly racist portrayal of AIM consists mainly of, to borrow Vizenor’s phrase, “drunken savages.”5 I do not mean to suggest that alcoholism is not a serious problem in Native America, and I address this issue in more depth in my analysis of In the Center of the Nation. But for our purposes here, with the exception of his regularly using hungover as a modifier, O’Brien doesn’t call attention to the quotidian struggles of alcoholism, as Brave Bird does and, to use a Nevadan example, as Gregory Martin does in his representation of omnipresent wino Voyne, who hangs around his family’s general store in Mountain City (2003).6 Instead, every time a Native appears in Spirit of the Hills, with the exception of James and Standing Elk, they are invariably drunk. By dismissing them as hopeless drunks, it becomes easier, perhaps, to advance a settler narrative and avoid
delving into the deeper tensions between Native Americans and white people on broken treaty land.

But O’Brien’s troubling representation of Katie, specifically, stands as what is very likely the most destructive, settler colonial stereotype in this book. As I point out earlier, Katie, like the inhabitants of the encampment and the Natives who frequent Medicine Springs’s lone watering hole, The Oasis, O’Brien represents Katie as a drunkard. He also objectifies her sexually while pointing out her Otherness in damaging ways. For example, when P.J. Billion, the man who murdered McVay’s brother Jimmy, staggers into the bar and sits at the next booth over from Katie, he first talks a bit of braggadocio and smack, and then lets fly with a disgusting, sexualized racial epithet. O’Brien writes, “Then he pointed to Katie Running, who’d been sitting in a booth with two men, trying to ignore what Billion was saying. ‘I’d love to fuck that squaw,’ he said” (59). Billion is wholly unlikeable—he is the bad guy, after all—and he represents all that is wrong with the dominant culture, and Katie, who overhears this disgusting remark, does stand up for herself and calls him a pig, but O’Brien writes himself onto very shaky ground here in terms of authorial sympathy, especially when we consider this scene in tandem with her first sex scene with McVay.

In this passage, as he and Katie prepare to get it on, McVay flashes back to a sexual encounter he had in Vietnam, and here O’Brien positions Katie as a colonized subject and sex object, blurring the distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism. He writes:

She reminded him just then of another woman, a woman in Saigon whose name McVay could not remember. . . The woman in Saigon could not speak English, so they had not talked. Maybe that was why it seemed perfectly natural for him and Katie to stare at each
other without a word as their faces drew closer, then focusing on the lips, closer until they touched. (97)

Here we see O’Brien Orientalizing Katie since his character McVay seems—in the heat of this unfortunate moment, at least—to associate Katie with the Vietnamese sex worker simply on the basis of both women’s non-whiteness. As Paul Witkowski puts it in his essay “If Prairies Had Trees” (1993), McVay “first responds sexually to the Indian woman as he had to a nameless Vietnamese whore, an exotic alien Other whose only function is as a projection of his own desire” (202). If, as Witkowski asserts, the wildly inappropriate exoticization of a Native American woman—on land rightfully hers, no less—only functions to fulfill McVay’s desire, her inclusion in the story is not even necessary. In their efforts to steer writers away from unsympathetic cultural appropriation, Shawl and Ward ask their creative writer-readers to ponder this question: “Is the culture you’re portraying intrinsic to the story, or is it only there to fancy up your depiction of events that might have taken place anywhere, at any time?” (90). The Lakota culture is intrinsic to this story obliquely, in that it is set on Fort Laramie Treaty land, but the Native characters, including O’Brien’s two Tontos, his gross misrepresentation of AIM, and particularly Katie the empty, sexual vessel, fancy up O’Brien’s novel, to use Shawl and Ward’s phrase. Interestingly, this conflation of Katie with the Vietnamese sex worker reveals the novel’s power dynamics even in a settler colonial context, just as more traditional, colonial examples of Orientalization show the imbalance of power in a colonial situation.

Settler colonialism is not the same as colonialism, as Veracini insists, and a “colonial system of relationships, unlike a settler colonial one, is necessarily premised on the presence and subjugation of exploitable ‘Others’” (15). A settler colonial set of relationships, of course, would not require these Others but would instead attempt to remove them, one way or another. Veracini
is thinking in terms of economics and labor here, since although Katie is a sexually exploitable Other, McVay is no Flaubert, Prospero, or Charles Marlow, and he has not arrived on an exotic, foreign shore for economic gain and cheap labor. He is on treaty land, Katie’s people’s land. The discourse that this scene enables involves power struggles between settlers and indigenes; settlers, as Veracini points out, “conquer as they move across space and are founders of political orders and carry their sovereignty with them” (The Settler 40). In this context, Katie is not a subjugated, exploitable Other, but rather, she is a victim of sexual conquest. O’Brien’s inclusion of her to “fancy up” the novel demonstrates his own participation in the “literature of dominance” (Vizenor 29). To put it another way, O’Brien welcomes her into the story vis-à-vis his own settler colonial domination of the narrative, and appropriating the right to welcome people, as Veracini explains and as we saw in my Micheaux chapter, is a definitive feature of settler colonialism (The Settler 38). This authorial decision, I contend, undergirds the myriad of problems arising in literature by white, often male, potentially culturally appropriative authors in South Dakota literature. O’Brien decided the story needed an extraneous, sexy, Lakota woman for whatever reason—for local color, perhaps, as Tompkins might suggest—but his principles of inclusion, at least in this early novel, demonstrate that settler colonial issues extend from the sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and legal realms and into treaty lands literature.

In his next novel, In the Center of the Nation (1991), O’Brien moves away from his experiment with stereotypes, beginning a slow pivot to sympathy for and allyship with Native people that will become even more pronounced in his later fiction. His representations in this novel are not perfect indicators of sympathy, empathy, or wokeness, but his overt use of damaging stereotypes, at least, vanishes, as we see in his representations of Elizabeth and Tuffy. In the cases of these two characters in this slightly later novel, we see that O’Brien’s
“imaginative sympathy,” to use Rankine and her co-editors’ phrasing, no longer “shuts off at the edge of whiteness” (17). This sympathy for these two characters, together with the care and detail with which O’Brien renders them as well as their prominence in the text, suggest that they are not extraneous and merely there for local color. In Center, a novel that showcases quotidian life in a small town on the edge of the Badlands, O’Brien’s cast of characters are primarily white but he does include some well-conceived Native characters, and with his Native representations, no sexual objectification issues or Tonto-esque caricatures arise. O’Brien thus avoids the settler-author problem of appropriative character-welcoming into the text.

Elizabeth, a mixed-blood Lakota woman who helps out on paralyzed cowboy John Kiser’s ranch, has clearly been traumatized, and O’Brien portrays her with sensitivity and care, and he also respects her cultural practices. O’Brien makes an interesting rhetorical move by devoting a full—but very short—chapter to Elizabeth’s recurring nightmare of her rape. O’Brien devotes Chapter 11 of Center to the aftermath of Elizabeth’s assault; the chapter consists of three paragraphs on a lone page, and although the straightforward, Western American narrative here is fairly linear compared to disjointed, postmodern trauma narratives such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved, the chapter’s compactness does jolt the reader into recognizing that something important and terrible has happened, despite the text’s detailing of uneventful, everyday rural life up to this point. O’Brien explains that Elizabeth could sense her nightmare would return, since things had been going a little too swimmingly lately: “Dreaming that dream had to do with life being too good. It came when things were going well, like now, with the easy spring and no problems with the cattle” (72). This sympathy for Elizabeth, I contend, denotes an important shift in O’Brien’s treatment of his Native characters; everything was relatively stable for her and
she is about to suffer a flashback-y, traumatic nightmare. As Dominick LaCapra puts it in his essay “Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains?” (2016):

Trauma brings out in a striking way the importance of affect and its impact on memory, pointing both to traumatic memory in the form of post-traumatic effects (repetition compulsions, startle reactions, overreactions, severe sleep disorders, including recurrent nightmares, and so forth) and to the challenge to work through them in a viable but perhaps never totally successful fashion. (377)

Elizabeth truly struggles, and unlike the Native characters in *Spirit of the Hills*, O’Brien does not reduce her to a stereotype with an unslakable thirst for beer and whiskey, but represents her instead as a human being trying to function despite this terrible event in her past. Moreover, in this chapter, O’Brien stops the dream *in medias res*, before Elizabeth suffers too much:

In the dream she felt the hard slap and heard the dress tear . . . This time it lasted long enough for her to feel the hands, like two vises, around her wrists and the prickly straw of the barn floor against her back. Mercifully she awoke with a whimper before she felt the weight on top of her or smelled the sweat and whiskey close against her face. (72)

He could have written a graphic scene here and purposefully missed this opportunity to textually represent the details of her sexual assault, showing sympathy for this character instead.

Also, in his representation of Elizabeth, O’Brien underscores legal ramifications of settler-indigenous relations, and at the same time, he treads a very delicate line of respectfully portraying Lakota spiritual practices without veering into cultural appropriation. O’Brien reflects the materialism of mainstream white culture and suggests, in a redoubling of settler colonialism, that Elizabeth will have land taken from her not only in a historical context stemming from the breaking of the Fort Laramie Treaties, but again, from the local bank, and that this time, she,
personally, will be the lone target of the land-taking. John Kiser has willed his ranch to Elizabeth, who becomes convinced that she will lose it since she won’t be able to afford the payments. She visits her family on the reservation at the height of her anxiety over this matter, and after her mother Agnes philosophically tells her that John would say that “these ranches never really belong to anyone,” Elizabeth retorts, “then it doesn’t belong to the bank, either.” Agnes then tells her daughter, “That’s true . . . but this is white-man business” (181). In his chapter devoted to differentiating between settlers and migrants, Veracini captures a crucial distinction related to legality and power structures, one that extends, I think, to indigenous people trying to maintain sovereignty within a settler state. He writes, “policy in settler colonial settings is crucially dedicated to enable settlers and neutralize migrants” (The Settler 43). Elizabeth knows that the local bank’s foreclosure policies will not be in her favor and that is why, before she even attempts to make a payment or seek a consultation, she believes so vehemently and with such resignation that the land will be taken from her. Her mother’s observation that “this is white-man business,” too, underscores the principle ideological differences in white and Lakota notions of land ownership, and implies that the odds are tilted drastically in the settler-bank’s favor.

At the end of this scene, O’Brien attempts to depict a Lakota prayer, which he pulls off with moderate success; he remains respectful and treats the subject matter with the gravitas it deserves, he avoids the magical Indianness that so dogged James Lebeaux and Joe Standing Elk in Spirit of the Hills, and he mostly stays in his white author’s lane by not attempting an authenticity-seeking, faux code-switch into Lakota language. For a bit of context, Elizabeth is so distraught about the potentiality of the bank’s foreclosure that her mother decides they should pray. O’Brien describes Elizabeth’s relatives carefully smudging the pipe to prepare it:
Kim handed the braid [of sweetgrass] to Rachel, who let the smoke cleanse the pipe before she put it together. She also passed the mixture of tobacco and red willow through the smoke before she began to pack it into the bowl. As she worked to prepare the pipe, Elizabeth looked around the circle. Everyone was serious. (183)

To his credit, O’Brien makes no derogatory, magical claims about Lakota cultural practices as he did in Spirit, which suggests that he has begun to rethink the ways in which he represents Lakota people and practices. Moreover, this chapter’s closing line, is in English: “‘All my relations,’ the old woman said” (183). Her use of English here raises an interesting problem in white representations of Natives in a settler state: negotiating the line between cultural appropriation and authenticity, a bunk yet persistent criteria of Western American literary criticism that focuses upon insider-outsider statuses, power, and authorial credibility. On one hand, since English is the colonizer’s language, Agnes speaking in English might be fraught, given the brutal history of outlawed Native languages during the boarding school period of the early and mid-twentieth century. But at the same time, O’Brien, the white outsider-author, refrains from having Agnes say Mitakuye Oyasin, the Lakota equivalent, and thus does not risk a suspect code switch by a white writer. O’Brien surely had Lakota language resources available, since he has Lakota employees, clients, and friends, according to his nonfiction work Wild Idea, but he decided to depict the entire scene in English. Neither approach is entirely just or unjust, necessarily, since the alternative would be to not represent Natives at all, which, as we have seen in the context of the vanishing Indian, does not work in terms of decolonized representations either. This is precisely why sympathy is so crucial in cross-cultural representations, as Rankine and her co-editors as well as Shawl and Ward emphasize. Although O’Brien lowered the bar so drastically in Spirit, he nearly redeems himself with his depiction of Elizabeth and her culture in Center, I
contend, since the book’s project of representing the edge-of-the-Badlands quotidian does move away from settler Anglo-centrism and towards inclusivity.

In addition, with his character Tuffy, O’Brien atones a bit for Spirit’s gross caricatures of drunken Natives; while Tuffy does drink, he is a character of depth and dark humor, more representative of persistent alcohol problems in Native America than a drunken stereotype. O’Brien represents him as responsible and able to function despite his alcoholism, and at the same time, O’Brien remains sympathetic to Tuffy’s struggles. When we first meet Tuffy, we learn that “he drank too much, and bad luck followed him like an orphaned lamb. But he was good-natured, loyal to his friends, and capable of putting in a day’s work, especially if he could do it from the back of a horse” (35). The adversative conjunction but in this passage denotes an enormous shift for O’Brien in terms of his representation of Native Americans; all of the descriptors following it are markers of high praise in the American West. Furthermore, Tuffy is an eminently likeable character with a dark sense of humor about the settler state. For instance, he discusses the then-spiraling AIDS epidemic with Ross and when Ross says that he does not think Natives will be affected much since “IV drug use is the big factor,” Tuffy fires back, “There are needles on the res . . . Besides, we don’t need needles. We can catch shit like that from infected blankets” (81). He is referring here to the blankets reportedly infected with smallpox, given to Native Americans by Lord Amherst and his ilk, but his wit and comedic timing make what could otherwise be construed as a solely bitter or despairing statement into grim humor. And even beyond his humor, Tuffy endears himself further to O’Brien’s readers via his devotion to his feline companion Clyde, whom he alternatingly refers to as “Mr. Clyde” or “you lazy fucker” (68, 69). Despite his gruffness, O’Brien makes it plain that Tuffy loves this kittycat, and after he sells his horse, Bozo, “Tuffy’s only remaining responsibility around the
place was to give Clyde, his cat, a bowl of milk, a can of cat food” (35). No matter how drunk he gets, Tuffy does his best to take care of Clyde. And late in the book, when Tuffy, still drunk, awakens from a nightmare and, mistaking Clyde for some sort of apparition, shoots him, O’Brien mercifully kills him off too just a few pages later in a motorcycle accident. Tuffy doesn’t have much in the way of deep companionship except for this cat, and O’Brien shows great sympathy for him that stretches well “beyond the edge of whiteness” so that Tuffy does not have to face life without his beloved cat (Rankine et al. 17).

But aside from his dark humor and humanizing affection for Clyde, Tuffy does important cultural work in the text, underscoring the problem of alcohol abuse while resisting stereotypification. I have already gestured to some passages that point to his work ethic and productivity, but in a particularly crucial scene, O’Brien’s Tuffy highlights the strategic placement of establishments that proffer beer and liquor adjacent to the reservation. Tuffy asks Cleve to go to the Dust Buster, which “was a beer joint strategically built on the edge of the reservation. Alcohol was illegal on the reservation, and business at the Dust Buster was brisk” (42). Here Tuffy helps O’Brien get at the enormous issue of alcoholism in general and liquor sales and dry reservations in particular, and when this novel was published in 1991, Whiteclay, Nebraska, just over the border and walkable from Pine Ridge, was in full swing, with four liquor stores for its 12 residents. Alcoholism in Native America, I contend, is a prime example of settler colonialism’s persistence and its adaptability, as we see in alcohol’s shift from its historic role in subversive, 19th century trading tactics into newer, horrifying iterations such as Whiteclay. Author, activist, and enrolled Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe) member Winona LaDuke summarizes the issue in Recovering the Sacred (2016) so veraciously that I quote her in full:

7 Alcoholism in Native America, I contend, is a prime example of settler colonialism’s persistence and its adaptability, as we see in alcohol’s shift from its historic role in subversive, 19th century trading tactics into newer, horrifying iterations such as Whiteclay. Author, activist, and enrolled Anishinaabekwe (Ojibwe) member Winona LaDuke summarizes the issue in Recovering the Sacred (2016) so veraciously that I quote her in full:
Alcohol has long been a weapon of choice for the federal government in its goal of destroying Native communities. While some communities had a history of fermented liquors in the Pre-colonial era, alcohol was pushed on Native Americans by traders eager to gain access to land and resources. As the European conquest impoverished and shattered Native communities, alcohol abuse became a way of self-medicating and even suicide. Today, alcoholism is one of the largest health and social epidemics in Native America. IHS studies indicate that Native American deaths attributable to alcoholic cirrhosis are 18 times higher than the national average. Four alcohol-related causes of death among the top ten for Native peoples: injuries, chronic liver disease (cirrhosis), suicide, and homicide. (196)

By asking Cleve, the novel’s white, evangelical, sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, and wholly unlikeable villain, to go to the Dust Buster, Tuffy, despite his unflappable good nature, exudes desperation and despair in that important moment. He wants to drink and surround himself with drunks; at moments like this, drinking with only Clyde the cat for company just isn’t enough. Furthermore, in a larger context, unlike O’Brien’s faulty representation of the perpetually wasted, AIM-like encampment, the Native barflies, and drunken, objectified Katie Running in Spirit, Tuffy and his struggles underscore the problem of alcoholism among Native populations rather than serving as just another drunken caricature, tacked onto a Western American novel for local color.

As a disclaimer, I do not mean to suggest that O’Brien exemplifies how a white, South Dakotan author might represent Native people in Center, but rather that this is the text in which we can begin to discern his slow pivot to a fraught allyship with them. Despite O’Brien’s sympathetic portrayals of Elizabeth and Tuffy, on the surface this book certainly appears to have
its problematic moments and overtly racist scenes. However, with Elizabeth and Tuffy in mind, coupled with the fact that Cleve, the novel’s villain, is white, evangelical, and consistently spewing his contemporary spin on ideologies of Manifest Destiny, O’Brien’s representation of anti-Native racism attempts to grapple with a hard and ugly truth: that anti-Native racism is a fact of life in western South Dakota. Just as his portrayal of Tuffy’s alcoholism attempts to address a social and health concern, I contend that these racist moments in the book are fairly and uncomfortably realistic. Consider, for instance, Cleve’s attempt “to talk Ross out of buying [real estate] near the Badlands” which is adjacent to the Pine Ridge Reservation (61). Cleve admonishes, “Hell, I lived here all my life. It’s simply not a good place to be . . . The reservation is only ten miles away and that’s a mess. It’s best to stay with the pure breeds in this country” (61). The “pure breeds” he refers to are almost certainly white, which is distressing enough, but he also suggests in this misguided warning that the reservation is a hotbed of alcohol and violence, and moreover, that the Lakota have physically ruined it.

Cleve’s statement reflects a commonly-held, absurd, racist misperception among white South Dakotans that the Lakota people cannot and do not take care of their people or their land. For example, just after the dust was settling from the July 3, 2020 protest against President Trump’s visit to Mount Rushmore, Facebooker Steve Puchbauer responded to a comment on the KOTA Territory News Facebook page, addressing a defense of the decolonizing LandBack movement with this grotesque bit of snark: “and what would they do with it, trash it like everything else[?]” (Puchbauer). Puchbauer’s racist vitriol, sadly, is representative of this illogical viewpoint that ignores the environmental damage wrought by settler colonialism, development, and environmental exploitation and extraction, and O’Brien captures it in that passage about Cleve’s anti-Native, biased warning to Ross. Then of course, there is Elizabeth’s
meditation on the fate of John Kiser’s friend Charley, which alludes to the misperception that Native people are irresponsible: “Though he always provided for his family, he found it hard to work a steady job . . . It was not unheard of for him to wander off in the middle of the day and never come back. This quirk drove employers mad. They were mostly white, and they would blame it on Charley’s Indian blood” (53). This unsettling memory, unfortunately, is entirely plausible and representative of many white people’s attitudes toward Natives in western South Dakota, where jokes about the Lakota being on Indian Time—i.e., perpetually late or truant—abound. Charley could have had any number of issues or reasons for his behaviors and blaming it on his race makes no sense; instead, it perpetuates an endless feedback loop of further discrimination by painting all Natives with the same broad brush. O’Brien’s principles of inclusion regarding these troubling scenes, then, in In the Center of the Nation indicate and implicate the persistent discrimination against Natives by settlers’ descendants in South Dakota: these moments in the book, I contend, are supposed to make readers uncomfortable by exposing these tensions.

In spite of the step forward that O’Brien makes in terms of Native allyship in Center, O’Brien appears to take two steps back in his 1996 novel Brendan Prairie (1996), an ecoterrorist, murder mystery whodunit set in the northern Black Hills that includes, again, no Native characters. This exclusion brings us back to difficult questions surrounding the vanishing Indian trope that plagued Eminent Domain; however, at the same time, O’Brien wrestles with the legacy and continuation of settler colonialism in the Black Hills in Brendan Prairie. Gone are the cast of characters awash in white privilege, roving around the Hills and demonizing (or in Katie’s case, hyper-sexualizing) Natives that we saw in Spirit; in Brendan Prairie, O’Brien’s main character, Bill Malone, is a biology professor and amateur falconer whose favorite high
prairie in the Hills is threatened by developers slated to build a complex named Mountain Air Estates. I do not profess to know why O’Brien did not include Native characters in this text, nor do I wish to defend this decision, since the Black Hills are unceded treaty land. But given the novel’s deep reckoning with the stupidity and failings of Western American mythologies and settler colonial exploitation, perhaps this novel’s premise, to quote Elizabeth’s mother Agnes in Center, was, for O’Brien, necessary “white-man business” (In the Center 181).

For example, in a particularly telling moment, O’Brien’s Malone pokes fun at American pioneer mythology and the illogical fictions pitched to would-be settlers by juxtaposing the notorious fallacy of rain following the plow with zoological illogicalities to a room full of biology students at Black Hills State University. During one of his lectures, Malone regales his students with these breaks in logic: “Their eyes had remained glued to Bill as he chronicled the evolution of scientific thought. They loved the examples of how nonscientific thought had led people to comic conclusions. Hummingbirds did not migrate on the backs of geese. Rain did not follow the plow” (67, my emphasis). In this wryly humorous passage, O’Brien mocks the absurd 19th century theory pushed by boosters to promote and encourage Western settlement. As historian Richard White puts it in It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own (1991), “According to the theory, as Anglo American settlers pushed west and planted crops and trees, rainfall would naturally increase” (132). This theory proved to be, of course, completely preposterous, and led to many settlers having to adapt or face ruination, rather than commanding the adapting. As White explains,

Rain-follows-the-plow theorists recognized that adequate rainfall was necessary for the growth of trees, but they also believed that trees also encouraged increased rainfall. By planting trees under the Timber Culture Act, farmers could, in effect, alter the climate.
and make it more humid. The law, however, did not transform the climate; instead, the climate transformed the law. (151)

The realities of the West’s harsh climate quickly debunked these theorists’ wild claims, and by alluding to this impossible theory in the text, O’Brien demonstrates an awareness of the West’s sordid, complicated history that was sorely missing in *Spirit*. The settlers were not so invincible after all, he seems to concede here; in fact, those who believed this fallacy, in tandem with their being lured West by the notion of acquiring so-called free land, were in many cases completely duped by the boosters.

Furthermore, O’Brien underscores a deep irony of settler colonialism, the tension between settlers and metropole tensions, by pointing out that opening federal land to developers usually has disastrous ecological consequences. In this way, too, O’Brien shows a marked progression in his thinking about settler colonialism, moving, perhaps, from embracing it and the Western myths wholesale to cultivating an athletic skepticism toward it in ecological terms. For instance, before their adventures in the Black Hills, Malone’s love interest Margaret, a Federal Fish and Wildlife Special Agent, had asked him to help the government re-introduce peregrine falcons to the Rocky Mountains. Later, in the Black Hills, he remembers her powers of persuasion and questions himself for falling for her libertarianism-tinged ploy: “Bill was amazed that Margaret had used the ineffectiveness of government argument to bring him to work. It was the fad even then to say that government agencies mismanaged everything they touched. Now Bill realized that if it weren’t for government there wouldn’t be anything left to manage” (93). This moment, I contend, highlights the friction between settlers and governing bodies, which is an important feature of settler colonialism which helps to distinguish it from colonialism. As Veracini explains, “the colonial situation is fundamentally premised on the sustained
reproduction of exclusive dichotomies (i.e., good and evil, civilised and primitive, culture and nature), the most essential one separating coloniser and colonised” (Settler Colonialism 16).

Though Homi Bhabha might problematize these clean, Saidean binary oppositions by declaring ambivalence, these are the categories driving Said’s Orientalism, easily discernable in scores of colonial books and films. The colonizers in those narratives are not, overall, at odds with their respective governing bodies. As Veracini insists, however, settler colonialism comprises three rather than two poles: metropole, settler, and indigene. Historian Walter L. Hixon summarizes Veracini’s triangular structure this way in American Settler Colonialism (2013): “The triangular relationship between settlers, the metropole, and the indigenous population distinguishes and defines settler colonialism. Settlers sought to remove and replace the indigenous population and in the process to cast aside the authority of the ‘mother’ country” (5). This tension is why, in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s first Dakota novel, By the Shores of Silver Lake (1939), Pa Ingalls refers to homesteading as a bet with Uncle Sam.8 That tension between settler and metropole continues to the present-day, explaining, for instance Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy’s fierce feud with the government over his supposed grazing rights on federal land in 2014.

In Brendan Prairie, this tension emerges when Malone realizes, in this scene, that in the context of conservation, private enterprise usually alters the landscape for the worse and that the land and its nonhuman inhabitants fare far better under the protection the federal government provides, though that preservation is often far from perfect in terms of compromised wilderness.9 Malone’s memory and subsequent minor epiphany do suggest a shift in O’Brien’s attitude toward the American settler colonial project and the damages the settlers’ enterprises did and continue to do. This scene, a far cry from the authorial voice in Spirit of the Hills which proudly
takes conquest for granted, suggests that at this stage, O’Brien is rethinking hegemonic, settler colonial relationships.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for our consideration of Brendan Prairie, O’Brien’s treatment of Deadwood’s history and the hokeyness that now surrounds it, as well as the book’s ecoterroristic, whodunit mystery of monkeywrenched heavy machinery that kills developer Andy Arnold, exemplify still another crucial aspect of settler colonialism as outlined by Veracini: that “settler colonialism is not finished” (68). In the novel, O’Brien captures the early days of the return to gambling in Deadwood, which was relegalized in 1989 after being outlawed in 1905. Prior to the reintroduction of gaming, Deadwood had been skating by on its Hickokian and mining histories, but these were not enough to keep it going and the town was in near economic ruin. Nevertheless, the 19th century figures of Deadwood’s heyday are still proudly writ large, though with a mix of hokeyness and desperation, in the town itself and in this novel. Although Veracini does not specifically explore western American tourism boosters’ efforts to lionize that initial settler past, he does note in a more general, theoretical sense that “settler colonialism forever proclaims its passing but it never goes away . . . settler ‘invasion,’” in Wolfe’s analysis is not ‘an event’ that can be ascribed to a past and no longer impinges on the present” (The Settler 9). In the U.S. West, one way this impingement manifests itself economically is via entrepreneurs’ attempts to valorize various elements of 19th century settlement. Tourist sites which exploit this history constitute a very visible, key thread of settler colonialism’s persistence in the United States and actively work against any attempts at full decolonization or, with Veracini’s assertion about avoiding “further displacement” in mind, any efforts to undo conquest (103). The results of celebrating the West’s brutal history via tourism are mixed, and in South Dakota, often carry more than a tinge of desperation. Consider, for instance, the moment when
Margaret checks into the Franklin Hotel and finds that her room has historical significance:

“They had given her the corner room where Calamity Jane was supposed to have once slept. There was a sign to that effect just outside the room” (30). Martha Jane Canary, known as Calamity Jane, lived in Deadwood for several years and is in fact buried next to Hickok in Mount Moriah Cemetery, perched on a hill high above Deadwood. The hotel management’s act of immortalizing the everyday—or everynight—activity of sleeping somewhere once thus seems a bit extreme, even for a regionally famous hotel attempting to find its footing in Deadwood’s post-1989 renewal.

But the Calamity Jane sign outside the corner room in the Franklin is only one way in which Deadwood struggles to reinvent itself while still asserting its gold rush glory days of the late 19th century. O’Brien presses further and realistically depicts the Western kitsch Margaret sees later in the book, when she goes for an early walk:

Even a garish gambling town like Deadwood is serene at five-thirty in the morning. A few neons still burned into the darkness but seemed desperate now . . . The historic courthouse was to her right as she left the [Franklin] hotel. She ran the entire length of Main Street, past the gambling halls and saloons. Past signs for tourist traps, the Wax Museum, the China Doll Restaurant. She passed two places that claimed to be the place Wild Bill Hickok was shot. Then she was on the lower side of town. (103)

The only details O’Brien misses here are the stagecoach rides and the cheesy western shootout reenactment, but in his defense, this scene does take place at five-thirty in the morning. But here, too, we see the lengths that Deadwood will go to—or the depths to which it sinks—to eagerly claim and tout its genocidal history. Gold was discovered in the Black Hills near Custer in 1874 and by 1876, the Black Hills Gold Rush was on and the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 in
figurative tatters. These miners, for the most part, were not rogues but instead had Americans’
popular approval. Historian Jeffrey Ostler offers this explanation in *The Lakotas and the Black
Hills* (2010): “The army’s lackluster efforts to evict miners from the Hills coincided with a shift
in national policy toward the Lakotas to lease or cede the Black Hills” and that ultimately,
“Americans believed in 1877 that they had gained permanent ownership of the Black Hills and
would have scoffed at the idea of Lakotas ever getting them back” (87, 103). The town of
Deadwood, then, fails to reckon with its genocidal past, and instead glorifies it, and thus, settler
colonialism is far from finished there.

At the same time, O’Brien suggests that newer forms of settler colonialism are on his
mind vis-à-vis the novel’s blatant disapproval of further development, by which I mean that new
settlers, even in this late twentieth century novel, just keep showing up, carrying with them the
potential to displace the current crop of displacers in a never-ending, vicious cycle, which, in
ecological terms and in the case of Malone’s beloved Brendan Prairie, will despoil the area even
further. In his discussion of RVs and the tiny house phenomenon late in *The Settler Colonial
Present* (2015), Veracini explains that “Settler colonial forms can be detected in recent attempts
to recover a sense of control by moving to new places in order to enable the adoption of new
practices (note the sequence: the former is a prerequisite for the latter)” (77). Mountain Air
Estates, I concede, will neither be tiny nor mobile, but Veracini’s astute observation can help us
think about its construction, given the novel’s temporal positioning during Deadwood’s attempt
at renewing itself by legalizing gambling. We can discern a loss of control and the hopes to
regain it in Margaret’s musings during that early morning walk:

The shabbiness, Andy Arnold [Mountain Air’s developer, later killed by sabotaged heavy
equipment] had told her . . . was the target of the special gambling legislation that was
rejuvenating Deadwood. A share of the profits would go to historic restoration. In a few years, Deadwood would again be the jewel of the West, and Arnold assured her that the economic lift from his development would only help. (30)

Arnold’s development, a new iteration of settler colonialism, will supposedly help to save Deadwood since it will bring jobs and provide housing, giving Deadwood’s depressed, 1980s economy a much-needed shot in the arm and at the same time, restoring its vaunted place in Western American history. While gambling in Deadwood is not a new practice historically, it would be—at that moment in time—for current and future generations. Gambling had been outlawed in Deadwood during the early twentieth century, and the prospect of tourist dollars would likely lure newcomers to the area to settle at least semi-permanently.

Furthermore, the prospect of development underscores a second strand of settler colonialism’s unfinished perpetuity here: continued destruction of the landscape, specifically Brendan Prairie. The very thought sickens Malone, a biologist and nature-lover. When we first meet Malone in chapter two, he is hiking near Spearfish, but “would rather have gone to Brendan Prairie but he was afraid he might find signs of development. Just thinking of it wrenched his heart” (17). The landscape of the northern Black Hills, particularly the Lead-Deadwood area, has been forever changed by mining, with two primary examples being the strip mining practiced by Homestake near Lead, three miles from Deadwood, where the so-called Open Cut pit hems in one side of town, and the high levels of arsenic and other poisons that contaminate Whitewood Creek, which flows from Lead through Deadwood on its way down from the Hills and onto the plains. The northern Black Hills bears significant scars from just 150 years of white settlement, and there is no question that settlement has already drastically tipped the area’s delicate ecological balance. Further development, of course, will only compromise the region’s
ecosystem further. And Malone, though we could obliquely view him as a Native ally of sorts—though there are no Native characters in this book—because of his vehement opposition to further development, remains a settler and enjoys settler privilege, and since his favorite meadow is about to be torn asunder, is at risk of psychological, if not physical, displacement. This novel, with its economic and ecological narratives, does important heavy lifting in terms of decolonizing the dominant narrative in South Dakota literature, especially when we consider what comes next in O’Brien’s fiction oeuvre: two Lakota-centered, historical novels, *The Contract Surgeon* and *The Indian Agent*.

“*The Terrible Collision of Cultures*”:

*The Contract Surgeon* and *The Indian Agent* as Settler Counternarratives

In his two biographical novels, *The Contract Surgeon* (1999) and *The Indian Agent* (2004), O’Brien brings a South Dakota historical luminary, Dr. Valentine T. McGillycuddy, to life. O’Brien recounts—with a bit of embellishment—McGillycuddy’s time as a surgeon at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where he tended to Crazy Horse after he was arrested and fatally bayoneted as well as his years as the agent of Red Cloud Agency (later renamed Pine Ridge), an already tense period made even more tenuous by the persistent friction between McGillycuddy and Lakota arch-traditionalist Red Cloud. These books, interestingly, work to undo conquest by narrating a key time period in the South Dakotan and American settler colonial project: the immediate, late 19th century, post-Battle of the Little Bighorn doing of initial conquest. Moreover, in these books, O’Brien continues along the allyship trajectory he began with *In the Center of the Nation* and its swerve from the harmful stereotypes that so dogged *Spirit of the Hills*, and mark a key turning point in O’Brien’s representation of Native Americans that inform his later nonfiction, as I argue later in this chapter. Although *Spirit of the Hills* set the bar quite
low, as I insist earlier, O’Brien, to his credit, resists portraying Crazy Horse or Red Cloud, two iconic Lakota figures, as noble savages, which was surely a temptation given his earlier efforts. In fact, we can read both novels, particularly *The Contract Surgeon*, as counternarratives to the noble savage stereotype. These two biographical novels, therefore, work to undo conquest by undermining the popular perception of the Lakota people as noble savages through O’Brien’s sympathetic and humanizing portrayals, and at the same time, although McGillycuddy’s philosophy and attitude did trend in favor of the settler project, O’Brien captures his misgivings and regret, ultimately refusing to depict conquest as a victory.

Ever since their first encounters with white Europeans and well beyond the initial settlement period, Native Americans have been regarded and dismissed as so-called *noble savages* in the American cultural imaginary. This characterization was—and remains—a key fiction in the justification of attempted Native genocide and displacement, a hallmark of the American settler colonial project. As Moore starkly points out, “America needed a noble savage, a worthy but dispensable enemy, to ennable their own ignoble and illegal conquest of a continent” (31). By positioning the Natives as ruthless savages, white settlers were able to perceive themselves as innocent, righteous victims of a terrifying, racialized Other as an adversary. Consider, for instance, this telling passage from Robert E. Riegel’s history text *America Moves West* (1930); Riegel reflects the dominant, nationalist, settler colonial sentiment in the opening lines of the chapter he has fittingly entitled “Removing the Indian Menace”:

Early settlers in the West were surrounded by innumerable dangers, of which by no means the least was the Indian. While the Indian was in many ways an interesting and admirable person, he made a very unpleasant neighbor for the white frontiersman. Periodically, and without due formality, he went to war; then the forest became alive with
lurking savages, and no settlement was safe. Peace and prosperity for the settler depended on the pacification of the Indian. Settlement could not proceed tranquilly until the Indians were quieted . . . . After the whites had met this trouble and overcome the evil (the Indians) they could enter upon the joy of possessing their rightful heritage. Killing Indians was like killing snakes—entirely desirable except from the standpoint of the victim. (54)

In this startling, early twentieth century passage, published just 40 years after the Wounded Knee Massacre, Reigel succinctly captures the murderous and racialized tenor of American settler attitudes, philosophies, and power dynamics, particularly Manifest Destiny, which hinged upon subjugation, displacement, and extermination of Native people.

But at the same time, Natives falsely embodied an idealized simplicity and nobility to settlers and Easterners alike, one so appealing that James Fenimore Cooper coopted it for his Leatherstocking tales. Riegel’s overtly racist, settler colonial passage, which heavily emphasizes the *savage* portion of the *noble savage* phrase, also includes a curious dependent clause that illustrates the modifier *noble*; the chapter’s second sentence begins, “*While the Indian was in many ways an interesting and admirable person,* he made a very unpleasant neighbor for the white frontiersman” (54, my emphasis). Riegel’s little disclaimer, of course, is supposed to position Natives as a worthy (but dispensable, as Moore reminds us) adversary. This false narrative of the noble savage, in turn, leached from the historical and legal realms into the cultural, dominating not only twentieth century fiction and film, but also tourism in the United States. White Americans dismissed conquest or regard it lightheartedly, and these attitudes continue to persist. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the eminent New Western historian Patricia Limerick struggled to even be taken seriously by her colleagues who
specialized in Southern American history. Limerick comments on the Western expansionist myth and its further warping by and embedment into popular culture, with the misperception of nobility as part of the problem in *Legacy of Conquest* (1987):

Conquest took another route into national memory. In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness . . . . The subject of slavery was the domain of serious scholars and the occasion for sober national reflection; the subject of conquest was the domain of mass entertainment and the occasion for lighthearted national escapism. An element of regret for “what we did to the Indians” had entered the picture, but the dominant feature of conquest remained “adventure.” Children happily played “cowboys and Indians” but stopped short of “masters and slaves.” (19)

This gross misperception of Native people, so prevalent in twentieth century fiction, scores of Hollywood Westerns, and Western American tourist traps, is precisely the harmful cultural tradition that O’Brien writes against in *The Contract Surgeon* and *The Indian Agent*, two books which address the key period between the end of the Great Sioux War and the Wounded Knee Massacre.

While Valentine McGillycuddy, known to many Lakota—including Red Cloud—as *Wasicu Wakan* (holy white man), did attempt to uphold the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 to the letter—which included ensuring that each tribal member received their prescribed allotment of clothing and food—and he believed that his efforts would serve to “civilize” the Lakota people, his philosophy differed radically from the genocidal views held by other ranking government officials. I want to first offer two brief summaries of these biographies for context; *The Contract Surgeon* assumes the first-person subject position of McGillycuddy, and chronicles his
experiences as a frontier surgeon in the newly-minted state of Nebraska as well as in Dakota and Montana Territories in the late 19th century. McGillycuddy was well-known for his sympathetic treatment of the Lakota and Cheyenne tribes, and he cultivated a friendship with Crazy Horse, which O’Brien traces. The novel climaxes with Crazy Horse’s assassination at Fort Robinson, Nebraska on September 5, 1877, and O’Brien imagines Dr. McGillycuddy’s point of view as he attends to the dying Lakota luminary. In *The Indian Agent*, O’Brien continues McGillycuddy’s story with the Lakota people, albeit in a less-engaging third person voice, and captures the tensions at Red Cloud Agency between the Lakotas and the military, and between McGillycuddy, an arbiter of so-called progress, and Red Cloud’s staunch traditionalism. Near the end of the book, after McGillycuddy is removed from his position as agent and his successor makes conditions far worse for the Lakotas, McGillycuddy returns to try to help deescalate the immense tension surrounding the arrival of the Ghost Dance to the reservation, which culminates in the Wounded Knee Massacre in December 1890; Dr. McGillycuddy cannot stop the tragic event but tries to save as many wounded Lakotas as he can in its immediate aftermath. In this book, O’Brien makes it clear that McGillycuddy clearly believed—at first—in the settler colonial project—or at least thought it inevitable to resist the accelerating encroachment of its power structures—and O’Brien gives the reader additional glimpses into his interpretation of McGillycuddy’s settler colonial philosophy, which entailed teaching the Lakotas to farm and educating their children in boarding schools, but not forcing them to eschew their culture and religious practices completely.

In *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (2010), Veracini parses various forms of population domination in settler colonialism, which he refers to as *transfer*. Transfer is a crucial difference between colonialism and settler colonialism; as Veracini reminds us, “while the
suppression of indigenous and exogenous alterities characterises both colonial and settler colonial formations, the former can be summarized as domination for the purpose of exploitation, the latter as domination for the purposes of transfer” (Settler Colonialism 34). Displacement, he argues, stretches well beyond the boundaries of physical place and into the psychological, cultural, and narratological realms. He identifies 23 major forms of transfer, some with distinct subcategories, and many of these could help to explain the tangled web of present-day settler colonialism in South Dakota.

But for our purposes with O’Brien’s representation of McGillycuddy in the late 1800s, three of Veracini’s categories are key to understanding his approach to relations with the Lakota people. McGillycuddy, I contend, sees the proverbial writing on the wall and can’t stop the structure of settler colonialism from being installed, but he does valiantly try to prevent the Lakota from experiencing what Veracini terms necropolitical transfer, or “when the indigenous communities are militarily liquidated” (Settler Colonialism 35). His aversion to extermination is a key piece of his approach to white-Native relations. In place of extermination, however, McGillycuddy accepts—and participates in, as reservation agent—the Lakota’s removal to reservations. In his definition of this form, ethnic transfer, Veracini makes the important point that Natives are intended to become non-Nativized, such is the extreme degree of physical and cultural displacement: “indigenous communities are forcibly deported, either within or without the territory claimed or controlled by the settler entity . . . [and] settler colonial projects are specifically interested in turning indigenous people into refugees” (Settler Colonialism 35). I do not mean to suggest here that McGillycuddy endorsed this approach or approved of it, but he did participate in this system, which suggests a tacit complicity. As I note earlier, in his time as reservation agent, he did not strongly discourage Lakota cultural and spiritual practices,
according to O’Brien’s representation, but many of his contemporaries and the agent who replaced him and subsequently panicked about the Ghost Dance certainly did.  

What McGillycuddy did approve of, in O’Brien’s estimation, and what he did endorse is what Veracini calls Transfer by assimilation, or “when indigenous people are ‘uplifted’ out of existence . . . Assimilation is generally understood as a process whereby indigenous people end up conforming to variously constructed notions of settler racial, cultural, or behavioral normativity” (Settler Colonialism 37-8). Perhaps the most infamous example of attempts to assimilate Native peoples in the United States was through the boarding schools of the early to mid-twentieth century, and these were brutal, totalizing institutions that outlawed Native languages, clothing, long hair, and cultural practices, and tried to replace them with English, Christianity, and vocational training. Beatings were everyday occurrences, sexual molestation and other forms of abuse were common, and the boarding schools’ ultimate and shameful legacy was generational trauma. The schools were the brainchild of Richard Henry Pratt, an Army officer who, according to Richard White, “convinced the government to help fund the [notorious] Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania” (It’s Your Misfortune 113). As White explains, “Reformers like Pratt were quite determined to destroy existing Indian cultures. Reformers believed that until they eliminated existing Indian beliefs and social forms, they could not assimilate Indians into American life . . . As Pratt put it, the goal was to ‘kill the Indian and save the man.’ The deculturalization Pratt demanded was virtually total” (113).

McGillycuddy’s complicated and unpopular approach to assimilation, according to O’Brien, involved his approval of boarding schools and teaching the Lakota to farm, yet he did not adopt the absolutist position espoused by Pratt. His assimilationist philosophy entailed encouraging the Lakotas to move forward and accept the new conditions of their own accord,
rather than by brute force. For example, early in *The Indian Agent*, when he first arrives at his new post at Red Cloud Agency, he tells Commissioner Hayt that “progress is a beast without regret. The Sioux will never again be the way I found them. Like all of us, they must accept change or perish” and then O’Brien includes McGillycuddy’s immediate afterthought in italics which shows his horror at the prospect of necropolitical transfer: “*God forbid that they should perish*” (29). O’Brien’s McGillycuddy clearly wants the impossible in his desire to assimilate the Lakotas of their own accord, but to his credit, he does not want them exterminated. I concede that this is rather a low bar, but given the United States’ official position on Indian Affairs at this moment in time, McGillycuddy’s transgressive philosophy stands as a remarkable exception. In fact, O’Brien’s McGillycuddy is so consumed by his hope for benevolent assimilation that he muses and fumes about it at home; later in *The Indian Agent*, McGillycuddy agonizes to his wife: “I have to find a way to bring these people to civilization” (203). Obsessed by his perceived task and perhaps sensing its unattainability, McGillycuddy ruminates about it constantly.

But at the same time, McGillycuddy’s stubborn devotion to assimilation indicates willful ignorance, utter denial, wild optimism, or perhaps all three. McGillycuddy repeatedly touts the boarding schools’ benefits without acknowledging their enormous problems. In *The Contract Surgeon*, for instance, McGillycuddy reminisces about the fate of his mixed-blood assistant Johnny, ruminating that “If I had it to do over again, instead of giving him the responsibility of being my interpreter and assistant I would have sent him off to be educated. With his experience he might have done well at Carlisle or perhaps Dartmouth” (51). Carlisle, as I note earlier, was a brutal experiment in assimilation, scarring most of its attendees and their families for generations, and the fact that this entire novel is a memory, with an aged McGillycuddy in California remembering his days on the Great Plains, suggests that he continued to think highly
of boarding schools throughout his life, according to O’Brien. Fittingly, McGillycuddy repeatedly extols the supposed virtues of boarding school throughout *The Indian Agent*, to Red Cloud’s dismay, and what is more, McGillycuddy seems incapable of acknowledging the difficulties of farming the semi-arid Pine Ridge area and continues to tout farming as a viable replacement for hunting and gathering. His insistence that this land could be farmed stands as a grave error in his reasoning—at best. Near the end of *The Indian Agent*, McGillycuddy gets into a heated debate with an anti-assimilationist, Dr. Bland, a purported pro-Native radical and editor of the 19th century periodical *The Council Fire*. He calls out McGillycuddy’s agrarian mistruths to his face, telling him, “You know it is a lie that this land can be farmed,” to which McGillycuddy weakly responds, “We are moving to the most modern methods” (254). McGillycuddy cannot defend his mistruths and orders this troublemaker off of the reservation and back into Nebraska.

However, according to O’Brien, McGillycuddy was far more lenient than his contemporaries in regard to the Lakotas’ continuation of their spiritual and cultural practices. In *The Contract Surgeon*, while Crazy Horse lay bayoneted and dying, Lieutenant Philo Clark complains to McGillycuddy that the Lakotas at Ft. Robinson were “organizing a Sun Dance for him” and then he peevishly adds, “There’s legislation in Congress to outlaw it” (164). McGillycuddy, O’Brien’s first-person narrator in this book, looks at him but does not reply, instead reminiscing, “Even then it seemed a travesty of law to prohibit a religious ceremony but I was focused on my own duty and so didn’t bother to comment” (164). McGillycuddy disapproves of Congress’s needless, settler colonial bill, but is powerless to do anything about it, and he recognizes here that arguing with this hardline lieutenant about it is a lost cause. What he *can* do is continue to tend to the mortally wounded Crazy Horse as best he can, which he does,
and at this point in the book, he has identified the wound as a punctured kidney, and while kidney removal was a brand-new procedure at this time, he mulls whether to risk it in a less-than-optimal, frontier field hospital rather than engaging in a pointless argument with Clark. We see a similar moment regarding McGillycuddy’s pliable approach to Lakota spiritual practices near the close of *The Indian Agent*, after the Ghost Dance arrives and the tensions preceding the Wounded Knee Massacre are brewing. McGillycuddy, finally ousted as agent but brought back to help restore communications and peace, has an intense conversation with General Royer, who tells him, “I think we’ve seen enough to know that they are on the verge of war,” to which McGillycuddy retorts, “Nonsense. They are praying” (305). Although the Ghost Dance appeared after his departure from the reservation, McGillycuddy still knows the ways of these people and recognizes that the Lakotas are not plotting some insurrection but are instead praying for the return of the buffalo and the disappearance of white settlers from their lands. His argument, unfortunately, was for naught.

By choosing to write two well-researched, biographical novels about McGillycuddy’s complicated relationship with the Lakotas, set against the backdrop of burgeoning conquest, O’Brien positions himself to continue his own journey toward a fraught Native allyship. He resumes his earlier project of producing more sympathetic portrayals that he began in *In the Center of the Nation* and temporarily set aside for *Brendan Prairie*, and in these books, as I note earlier, he must work hard to undercut the dominant noble savage stereotype so prominent in works that address this time period. O’Brien begins to set up McGillycuddy’s incredulity toward the dominant, noble savage narrative early in *The Contract Surgeon*; his third chapter recounts McGillycuddy’s humorous, surprise encounter with a young Native man while swimming in the Knife River. The Native—who happens to be Crazy Horse—and McGillycuddy startle each
other at their unintentionally shared swimming hole, staring each other down until a passing bird defecates on McGillycuddy. At this amusing moment, McGillycuddy’s empathy emerges: “I, of course, couldn’t see what was happening but my Sioux counterpart did and a small, involuntary smile spoiled his sinister glare just as I felt the fecal matter hit my forehead . . . in an instant we were both laughing loud enough to frighten the horses” (14). This scene marks the beginning of McGillycuddy’s friendship with Crazy Horse, and furthermore, McGillycuddy refuses to dismiss Native Americans as savages for the remainder of the text, as the rest of the regiment does. Instead, McGillycuddy acknowledges the Natives at Fort Robinson as human beings, as we see in his careful tending of Crazy Horse’s grave wound, and in his treatment of the Cheyenne woman during a difficult childbirth. I do concede that McGillycuddy is still a product of his time; he does not give up his own culture in a sentimental, Dances with Wolves-esque display of cultural appropriation, nor does he fully embrace Native culture, as we see in McGillycuddy’s curious observation about his half-Native assistant Johnny who resorts to suicide. After Johnny’s death, McGillycuddy reflects, “As it turned out, his Indian side was never as far from the surface as I thought. When I was not able to protect him with my example, he was not strong enough to resist” (52). This odd scene does make sense in the context of McGillycuddy’s continued participation in the settler colonial project despite his growing realizations that Americans, rather than Natives, are the aggressor. Yet McGillycuddy respects cultural differences and seems to view his role as doctor to everyone. His most anti-colonial moments occur when he is just trying to do his job as doctor in a colonial setting, as we saw in that exchange with Lieutenant Philo Clark as Crazy Horse slowly bleeds out hours after the bayonet incident.

O’Brien’s sympathetic portrayal of Crazy Horse even extends to his cause of death, and in his telling of the story, McGillycuddy intentionally administers his friend a morphine overdose
to spare him from suffering an experimental procedure that is likely to fail or the prospect of imprisonment. Crazy Horse’s injury occurs during a scuffle just after an Army regiment hauls Crazy Horse into Fort Robinson; an overzealous Army private stabs him with a bayonet during the ensuing chaos. O’Brien’s account of the bayoneting, to this point, accurately reflects historical accounts of this event. The assassination of Crazy Horse is still hotly debated today, and the myriad of competing conspiracy theories surrounding this event have yet to resolve the cause of his death, the weapon which caused it (some historians assert that he was knifed rather than bayonet), and the supposed accidentalness of his assault (many historians and laypersons believe it was planned). But O’Brien makes one radical departure from historians and conspiracy theorists in this text: his McGillycuddy kills Crazy Horse, intentionally administering an overdose of morphine to ease the Oglala leader’s suffering and prevent his imprisonment. He reasons that if he attempts to save Crazy Horse via an untried and untested kidney removal operation and he succeeds, Crazy Horse will face removal to a military prison in the wastes of Florida anyway. O’Brien’s McGillycuddy thus commits what he believes to be an act of mercy for his friend.

Crazy Horse’s death scene is arguably O’Brien’s most sympathetic representation of Natives in his oeuvre thus far, and at the same time, O’Brien overtly challenges the settler colonial metanarrative of dominating the so-called savages. Here, O’Brien veers into speculative fiction, offering readers the possibility that McGillycuddy kills Crazy Horse:

Finally I came to the decision that I have kept secret all my life and my head began to nod almost imperceptibly. Fanny understood . . . Without another instant of hesitation I took up the vial of morphine, but I did not mix the powder in water until Fanny had moved discreetly between me and Johnny. When my movements were shielded I dumped
the entire contents of the vial into the pure water, shook it quickly, and loaded the syringe with all it would hold. When I knelt at Crazy Horse’s side I did not let myself falter. I eased the needle into his arm and pushed the plunger until the last drop of deadly morphine disappeared into his body. (217)

We can interpret this moment in a number of ways: as an act of mercy, as an enactment of a white savior complex, and perhaps even as McGillycuddy functioning as an arm of the metropole. The ramifications of this scene scaffold the novel, which is set up as a memory recalled by McGillycuddy during his final years in California, and in this flood of memories, McGillycuddy’s regret for having been a participant in the American settler colonial project suggest that the fictional overdose is an act of mercy.

Furthermore, this morphine narrative is unique to O’Brien. In my research, I have found no historical scholarship, biography, works of creative nonfiction, or legal documents that claim otherwise. In her book *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942), for example, Mari Sandoz does not at any point even entertain the notion that McGillycuddy might have killed Crazy Horse in an act of mercy. When she describes the Lakota leader’s moment of death, McGillycuddy, the attending physician, *is not even in the room*.12 The entire premise of the latter half of *The Contract Surgeon*, on the other hand, is a series of remembrances as McGillycuddy sits with Crazy Horse as he bleeds out. While O’Brien may have embellished the cause of death and other key moments in their friendship, I contend that his representation of Dr. McGillycuddy humanizes Crazy Horse, displaying a profound level of sympathy that we have not seen thus far in his oeuvre.

Finally, in *The Contract Surgeon*, O’Brien represents settler conquest as an anti-victory that ultimately causes cultural and ecological harm. I want to underscore here that as O’Brien’s
McGillycuddy reminisces, he recognizes that Crazy Horse’s demise held enormous significance for his followers, for Lakota culture, for American expansion, and for himself. McGillycuddy alludes to the event early in the book, foreshadowing it in almost apocalyptic terms: “The turning point of my existence came suddenly on the sixth of September in 1877. The loves that have comforted me since that day were only beginning to prove themselves, so I did not realize that the Great Plains of North America would never be the same” (4). Here, in hindsight, McGillycuddy acknowledges the significance of Crazy Horse and how his having gone to the spirit world held dire implications for the entire Plains region. O’Brien makes a similar move with the opening line of the final chapter, zooming out again with a sweeping, regional statement that is even more explicit in its rebuke to the American settler colonial project: “Since that day, the Great Plains have writhed and twisted under the white man’s yoke” (219). With Crazy Horse’s passing, according to O’Brien, initial settler conquest has finally occurred, and by invoking the temporal, O’Brien reifies Veracini’s observation that settler colonialism is unfinished (The Settler 68). Furthermore, prior to the assassination, O’Brien emphasizes the common ground inherent in McGillycuddy’s friendship with Crazy Horse, and McGillycuddy shows regret for his role in the settler project. McGillycuddy remembers:

I had talked with Crazy Horse for hundreds of hours about the topography of the plains, our mutual love of horses, the wild grass and animals that were so important to us both. I had seen his humility and his untiring attention to the needs of his people. I knew of his love for children. I had surveyed his land from corner to corner. I had been the first white man to stand on top of the tallest peak in his sacred Black Hills, an unwitting facilitator of the gold mining to come. (35)
Here we see McGillycuddy’s sympathetic understanding of the significance these various elements of the Plains held to Crazy Horse; this passage undercuts any fallacious notions of noble savagery. He acknowledges the sacredness of the Black Hills, and by noting that he had “been the first white man,” to stand atop Black Elk Peak, he refuses to claim its first ascent. And by describing himself as an “unwitting facilitator” of mining, he admits his role in not only aiding and abetting the gold rush that ultimately broke the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, but also the ecological implications of greedy miners honeycombing the Hills with mine shafts and poisoning its delicate watersheds. This moment exemplifies an important waypoint in the progression of O’Brien’s deepening allyship with the Lakota people that we see in The Contract Surgeon and The Indian Agent via O’Brien’s representation of McGillycuddy, whose own complicated relationship with the Lakotas comes to life in these biographical novels. Through McGillycuddy, O’Brien illustrates a crucial time period in the late nineteenth century and imagines the initial conquest through a sympathetic lens.

**Later Fiction: Regional Tropes and Social Justice in Stolen Horses**

O’Brien’s Stolen Horses (2010) marks yet another milestone in his progression to Native allyship in that he places contemporary, indigenous social justice at the center of the text. The book explores interesting clashes between the Old and New Wests in the fictional town of McDermot, Nebraska, which is the county seat of also-fictional Lakota County. While the novel at times interrogates and meditates upon the minutiae undergirding the quotidian lives of its mostly white townspeople as well as its newcomers, most of its tension arises from a muckraking journalist’s investigation of the needless death of Tad Bordeaux. Bordeaux, a Lakota teenager who stole and promptly crashed an SUV in an attempt to impress a girl, sustained grave neurological damage in the rollover and was denied immediate treatment at the new, state-of-the-
art clinic in McDermot. The local hospital, unable to treat him, Life-Flighted him to Denver, and with the critical Golden Hour of care long gone, he dies there. Gretchen Harris, the journalist, discovers and attempts to report the clinic’s wrongdoings, until the clinic CEO successfully lobbies to muzzle her story of injustice. And while Bordeaux did steal the vehicle, O’Brien flips the contemporary settler colonial trope of Natives as ne’er-do-wells and criminals; instead, he depicts the theft as a mistake made by a carried-away adolescent and focuses upon the social injustice of this underserved Native American man in need of health care. In this book, O’Brien undoes narrative conquest by inverting a tired, settler colonial trope and using it to get at issues of injustice and inequality.

The criminalization of Native Americans in the American cultural imaginary parallels the criminalization of African Americans to a point, since both stem from the demonization of the Other; however, for Native Americans, this criminalization is somewhat different in that it also involves elements of settler colonial transfer via institutionalization. Natives have historically been incarcerated for minor infractions, political agitations, cultural transgressions, and a host of other so-called reasons that, for white people, would only warrant a slap on the wrist. Veracini catalogues this trend within the larger category of settler colonial transfer, or “the capacity of shifting substantial clusters of peoples,” under the classification “Indigenous incarceration / criminalization / institutionalization” (Settler Colonialism 33). According to Veracini, in a settler colonial situation, indigeneity is itself a jail-able offense, and he explains this form of transfer as “when indigenous peoples are forcibly institutionalised in one way or another. At times, indigeneity is collapsed with criminal behaviour, and incarceration, of course, transfers indigenous people away from their communities and land” (Settler Colonialism 45). In the United States, Native prisoners, like African Americans and Latinos, comprise a disproportionate
percentage of imprisoned populations. In South Dakota, the situation remains especially dire; according to a 2019 press release from the ACLU,

> Although Native Americans make up about 9 percent of South Dakota’s population, they are roughly half of those booked into jails in the state. While racial disparities in incarceration rates exist nationwide . . . the disparities in South Dakota are far greater: according to data from the Vera Institute of Justice, Native Americans between the ages of 15 and 64 are incarcerated at 10 times the rate of white people in South Dakota.

(“Prison”)

This disparity, in turn, further inscribes the notion of Natives as criminals in cultural representations. Countless cultural offerings, from the marauding savages in the John Wayne vehicle *Red River* (1948) to murderous prisoner Shep Proudfoot in the Coen Brothers’ *Fargo* (1996) and beyond, indigeneity has been and continues to be represented as a criminal act.

O’Brien’s depiction of Tad Bordeaux’s crime as a stupid and relatively unimportant teenage mistake, then, marks not only an important shift in his work—this is a far cry from his menacing AIM members in *Spirit*—but an important move by a white writer on the Northern Plains. O’Brien devotes chapter two of *Stolen Horses* to this incident; Tad Bordeaux’s pickup gets a flat tire and he and Annie, the girl he is attempting to woo, begin to walk, happening upon a Ford Expedition with the keys in plain view. O’Brien portrays Tad as simultaneously trying to be chivalrous but also attempting to impress Annie with his derring-do:

> The first thing Tad said after they squealed away from the park was that he was going to get into a lot of trouble. “I’ll take you home,” he said. “They might get me because of my pickup, but if they come for you, tell ‘em I forced you into it.” He was frightened but smiling with the excitement. “Take you home in style.” (11)
O’Brien’s representation of Tad Bordeaux is not that of a hardened criminal or repeat offender. He’s an inexperienced kid who doesn’t really know what he is doing out there; he speeds, swerves to miss a deer, and rolls the Ford Expedition, sustaining what would become a fatal head injury. In the chapters that follow, O’Brien shifts the book’s focus to the trauma care that Tad didn’t receive in time, never painting him as a criminal.

Although Tad Bordeaux’s appearance in the novel is brief and early, and almost all of the book’s other characters are white, O’Brien does not let Tad or the Lakotas vanish in this book. I address health care disparities shortly, but I also want to point out that the novel’s very title, *Stolen Horses*, comes from that stolen Ford Expedition; there are no actual stolen horses in this text. Horse-stealing, for the Lakotas, became a time-honored way to become more mobile, in a practical sense, and also a way for young warriors to prove themselves. As Jeffrey Ostler puts it, in the late 18th century, as the Lakotas moved west and into the Black Hills, “through a combination of trading and raiding, the Lakotas had acquired larger horse herds and were now in a position to move onto the Plains west of the Missouri” (9). A century later, even with their dominion of what is now western South Dakota waning after the triumphs of the Plains Wars and the tragedies of Wounded Knee and the loss of the Black Hills, horse-stealing persisted. James Welch explains that young men among Sitting Bull’s people, who had fled to Canada after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, stole horses despite the relative peace there: “trouble was almost nonexistent then, and the young men were impatient to prove themselves as warriors—and the only way to do this now was by stealing horses” (252-3). O’Brien’s title, then, makes an important nod to this culturally significant practice and Tad’s not-so-dastardly deed.

Tad’s untimely demise, however, does not mean that he functions as an expendable, token Native character since O’Brien uses his death as an opportunity to explore health care
disparities at the intersection of indigeneity and class. Native Americans have historically been underserved, if they receive any treatment at all. Native Americans in Nebraska, where O’Brien sets fictive McDermot, as well as South Dakota and other Plains states often rely on Indian Health Services (IHS), a federal agency notorious for its grossly inadequate care. According to Mark Walker’s article, “Fed Up with Deaths, Native Americans Want to Run Their Own Health Care” (2019), IHS provides government medical care to 2.2 million of the nation’s 3.7 million American Indians and Alaska Natives and is widely judged to provide substandard care . . . . In states with Indian Health Services hospitals, the death rates for preventable disease—like alcohol-related illnesses, diabetes, and liver disease—are three to five times higher for Native Americans. (Walker)

These staggering numbers suggest that this negligence in terms of adequate health care is yet another piece of American settler colonialism, one we can lump under Veracini’s category of necropolitical transfer (genocide). Moreover, for the Lakotas, this negligence very likely violates the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868; its Article XIII stipulates that “The United States hereby agrees to furnish annually the physician, teachers, carpenter, miller, engineer, farmer, and blacksmiths, as herein contemplated, and that such appropriations will be made from time to time, on the estimate of the Secretary of the Interior, as will be sufficient to employ such persons” (“Fort”). In Walker’s article, enrolled Zuni tribal member Rear Adm. Michael Weahkee makes this very accusation, albeit in a broader national context involving all of the treaties between the U.S. government and Native peoples. Weahkee, who also happens to be “a top official in the Indian Health Service,” explains that the IHS has been systematically starved for funds which in turn affects its ability to uphold the treaties: “I don’t think the federal government
has fulfilled its treaty obligations for providing health care because it has not provided I.H.S. with the resources to do so” (Walker). As it has in other arenas, such as its disastrous boarding schools like Carlisle, here, too, the United States shows utterly gross neglect in terms of providing adequate health care for Native Americans. While O’Brien’s Tad Bordeaux isn’t carted off to an IHS facility—apparently there wasn’t one near McDermot—I emphasize this historically institutionalized maltreatment of Natives’ health so that we might better understand the enormous significance of the issue O’Brien takes up in *Stolen Horses*.

Instead, the two available facilities are the local hospital in McDermot, which is underequipped to treat Tad’s complicated neurological trauma sustained in the accident, and the shiny, new, state-of-the-art “clinic” that could have treated him but refuses, and reporter Gretchen Harris’s investigations uncover the brutal tensions between indigeneity and in terms of medical treatment. For a bit of context and concise summation of the problem, I point to the moment when Gretchen first pitches the story to her editor. She tells him, “I want to do this story . . . the [Dr.] Cring [a surgeon and administrator at HPMC] story. The HPMC story. Refusing care. Selecting patients according to their ability to pay. The whole for-profit, private clinic thing” (148). Tad, it seems, has not been the only patient Dr. Cring has refused to treat, but he is the most recent, and the fact that his death has inspired her to write this story—and that he was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back—gestures toward her belief that this young Lakota man is *not* disposable, despite the town’s overt racism and settler colonial origins.

Moreover, she recognizes its nuanced complexities immediately; these are reified when she first begins her article and interviews Ida Miller, an African American doctor at the local hospital, who agrees to speak about HPMC. Initially, Ida attempts to steer the inquiry toward class rather than race by insisting: “This is way simpler than a race deal . . . It’s money, girl, money. Sure,
HPMC doesn’t want to work on Indians, but it’s incidental that they’re Indian. Who they don’t work on is poor people. Uninsured people. Underinsured people” (42). Ida corrects herself later in this scene, but says this first, perhaps, to complicate the issue and introduce class as another possible factor for Dr. Cring’s refusal to treat Tad. Later in the interview, Ida concedes that Tad’s ethnicity is not incidental after all but is instead directly tied to racism and assumptions of Tad’s poverty: “Cring knows an Indian name when he hears one and he knows the best he’s going to get is Medicare rates” (42). Here we see the intersection laid bare, with race and poverty inextricably linked and working in tandem to ensure precarious conditions regarding health care for Native Americans living in and near McDermot, Nebraska. Ultimately and unfortunately, after Gretchen interviews Dr. Cring, the story is quashed. Fearful of his threats to bring a devastating lawsuit and of losing advertising dollars, which would sink the struggling paper, the editorial board refuses to print it. But even if Gretchen’s story never materializes in print to expose these health care disparities, O’Brien still calls attention to them by virtue of his focusing so much of the novel’s tension upon them.

In fact, O’Brien presses further, occasionally using the language of settler colonialism to emphasize the origin of these intersecting conditions of precarity. Two instances in the novel stand out in particular; first, Ryan Hooper, Gretchen’s employer and editor of the local newspaper, the Gazette, uses the vexed term “frontier” in his initial discussion with Gretchen about her article idea. He tells her, “This is the last frontier for the medical industry—only real center for two hundred miles in any direction, free of little encumbrances like managed care. Land of the libertarian. Milk and honey” (52). The fictional cliché of a last frontier, so prevalent in American culture since Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed in his 1893 Frontier Thesis, continues to emerge nonetheless in popular culture in iterations ranging widely
from the film *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* to Alaskan license plates declaring the state to be “the last frontier,” and all of these proclamations, despite the continuous creation of one imaginary frontier after the next, reinscribe and in fact attempt to justify settler colonialism in popular American culture. For Gretchen’s editor to use this language, then, points to the venture capitalist justification for settling these out-of-the-way, rural backwater towns by fancy but crooked clinics such as HPMC, where treatment will likely be refused to Native Americans. O’Brien makes a similar move in his metaphorical referral to HPMC as a “land office” in his description at the beginning of chapter 21. He writes, “It was clear that the High Plains Medical Clinic was doing a land-office business, especially when its physical plant was compared to the nonprofit regional hospital housed in an aging building just across the street” (138). His language here invokes the land rush of the initial period of settlement following the Homestead Act of 1862, and underscores further his idea of these clinics in terms of frontierity and the Othering of Native peoples.

While this novel, with its focus upon indigenous social justice, marks further progress in O’Brien’s literary undoing of conquest, one possible concern arises: O’Brien kills off the lone, developed Native character. Tad Bordeaux, after all, had virtually no power; he got carried away, made a mistake, and paid dearly for it. Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward warn their white, creative writing audience against making such a move, terming this tack *subtle victimization*: “You know you’re in the presence of this error when everyone is beautifully and insightfully characterized; but the black characters are all victims and/or minor criminals, and power remains in the hands of the power elite (almost exclusively straight and white though not all-male anymore)” (54). If we replace “black” with “Native” in their passage, we have, it seems, an apt description of Tad Bordeaux, and in this light, this novel, too, suggests a persistently fraught, somewhat uneasy
allyship with Native people—though not nearly to the extent of *Spirit of the Hills*—in that the power dynamics remain grossly off-kilter and lean decisively in the settler-author’s favor in terms of controlling the dominant narrative. However, O’Brien’s inversion of the criminal trope for the purpose of exposing the health care disparities does exonerate him somewhat; Tad’s death did in fact spark a heated civic debate regarding who gets to be treated at HPMC. That debate, though it doesn’t undo conquest outright, at least undercuts it somewhat in terms of settler colonialism’s ongoing brutalization of historically underserved Native people. O’Brien, it seems, may have martyred Tad to get at these pressing issues: a fraught decision, perhaps, but a far cry from his own transgressions in *Spirit*, and because of his refusal to dote on Tad’s criminality, certainly not categorizable as subtle victimization.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have traced the fits and starts of Dan O’Brien’s progression toward a productive—though fraught—allyship with the Lakota people in his fiction and have considered how they might work to undo conquest, which, as Veracini explains, might be the only viable answer to the seemingly impossible problem of settler colonialism and its premise of displacement (*The Settler* 103). O’Brien, an outsider-Ohio transplant, brought his typical Western American misunderstandings with him and translated them into caricatures and misrepresentations in his early work. I pointed out issues with *Eminent Domain* and especially with *Spirit of the Hills* which reinforce rather than undo conquest: the former through its total lack of Native characters, and the latter through its usage of grotesque, aggressive deployment of Native stereotypes. But beginning with *In the Center of the Nation*, we can sense a turn as O’Brien abandons these harmful stereotypes and begins to sympathetically represent his Native characters, addressing trauma, alcoholism, and racism in meaningful ways through Elizabeth and
Tuffy, which marks the beginning of a crucial shift. O’Brien attempts to expose important Native issues in Center, and at the same time, he takes a stab at representing important, Lakota cultural practices, as we saw in the prayer scene with Elizabeth’s family. For his primarily white, South Dakotan readership, who very possibly might harbor the same resentments and biases as Mr. Puchbauer spewed forth in his Facebook comment to the KOTA news article about the Mount Rushmore protest, this sort of positive, respectful representation matters a great deal in terms of its having the power to transform attitudes and change minds, and even putting a potential, eventual undoing of conquest within the realm of possibility.

Yet in his next book, Brendan Prairie, O’Brien seems to relapse and revert back to the vanishing/vanished Indian trope of his early collection Eminent Domain, which is dangerous terrain for a white writer who sets his stories ultimately upon stolen ground. It certainly appears, initially, that O’Brien retakes control of the dominant, settler colonial narrative with this exclusion in Brendan Prairie. I do not mean to defend his erasure, or his omissions, or his failure to include at least a passing admission that the Black Hills are unceded treaty land in this book, but I must reiterate and underscore here that in this later book, O’Brien grapples with aspects of settler colonialism in productive ways, while Eminent Domain does not. The crucial difference, I think, is that although Native characters are absent, they have not vanished in this latter text, and that an undercurrent of conquest courses through the novel, stretching even beyond sociopolitical and historical forms and into newer, economic and ecological strains of settler colonialism that point to Veracini’s assertion that settler colonialism is ongoing.

The Contract Surgeon and The Indian Agent both mark an important waypoint in the progression of O’Brien’s deepening allyship with the Lakota people, via the historical figure of Dr. Valentine T. McGillycuddy, whose own complicated relationship with the Lakotas comes to
life in these biographical novels. Through McGillycuddy, O'Brien illustrates a crucial time period in the late nineteenth century and imagines the initial conquest through a sympathetic lens. Moreover, O’Brien’s biographical novels demonstrate his exhaustive research efforts—replete with a timeline and maps, *The Contract Surgeon* is especially impressive—in trying to understand settler and Lakota history in western South Dakota. Though I briefly discuss his nonfiction works in another chapter, I want to underscore here that the research O’Brien conducted for his McGillycuddy novels affects his representations of Lakota culture in his bison memoirs in meaningful ways, and I contend that his nonfiction would not be nearly as rich—nor his commitment to bison ranching and prairie restoration efforts as staunch—without his broadened understanding of Lakota history and culture. Though he has not admitted to such a thing in his rare interviews, O’Brien’s nonfiction works reveal a complex parallel between his life and McGillycuddy’s: both men showed sympathy and respect for the Lakota people while still upholding the tenets of and benefiting from settler colonial structures. Indeed, O’Brien’s two bison ranching memoirs *Buffalo for the Broken Heart* and *Wild Idea*, chronicle his project of reintroducing bison to a little corner of the Great Plains; in addition to making humanely killed, grass-fed and -finished bison commercially available in South Dakota’s food deserts and beyond, O’Brien makes bison body parts available to the neighboring Lakotas for ceremonies and he valiantly attempts to restore his little corner of western South Dakota’s ravaged grasslands. Yet at the same time, O’Brien benefits from settler colonialism through this capitalist enterprise, much as Dr. McGillycuddy benefited from participating in conquest, and although this hard fact doesn’t completely undermine his efforts, it does trouble the waters.

*Stolen Horses*, too, marks another important waypoint on O’Brien’s trajectory toward a fraught allyship, in that Tad Bordeaux’s death early in the book raises questions about erasure
but at the same time, points out and implicitly argues for Native social justice and equity in health care for indigenous people. This book underscores and exemplifies Veracini’s assertion that settler colonialism is ongoing, and in the text itself, emerges and reemerges in health care disparities as well as in the local newspaper’s resistance to run Gretchen’s exposé. O’Brien’s authorial decision to snuff the only substantive Native character by page 74, however, does constitute a troubling, narratological vanishing of the Lakota people; in this light, while still a far cry from *Spirit of the Hills*, this book remains a vastly imperfect example of authorial allyship. Yet at the same time, Tad’s death sparks important conversations about the perceived disposability of indigenous people in a settler state, and its contemporary iterations of the same old teleological, genocidal aims of initial conquest, appearing in this book not only as those health care disparities but also as sheer neglect and denial. Read this way, O’Brien’s decision to make Tad’s death cast a contemplative pall over the remainder of *Stolen Horses* and dominate the plotline makes an important gesture: Tad, though dead, *has not vanished*, and this key distinction therefore pushes back against the dominant frontier narrative so prevalent in South Dakota literature.

While Dan O’Brien’s two bison memoirs, *Wild Idea* and particularly *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*, have garnered more critical attention, my attempt here at a serious and sustained reading of his fiction shows that allyship, like settler colonialism, is never finished. O’Brien’s bumpy path from erasures and stereotypes in his early work to that crucial pivot to sympathetic-yet-rough characters in *In the Center of the Nation*, to his more refined and exhaustively researched renderings of Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, and Lakota people and culture in his two biographical novels, to Tad’s demise and its aftermath in *Stolen Horses* show a marked progression in his representational allyship. In his later works of fiction, even when Natives are
not physically there, they have not vanished from the texts, which in turn pushes back against South Dakota’s official and unofficial positions on Native displacement, present in the state’s literature, laws, history, tourist attractions and other economic engines, and perhaps in the potentially-swayable attitudes of some of O’Brien’s readers. While these books do not advocate for overt and total decolonization, they do demonstrate that a literary “undoing of conquest” is indeed possible, and they lay the crucial groundwork for another tottering and overdue cultural step forward, whenever it may come.
1 Veracini is Australian and might, if pressed, suggest different solutions to “undoing conquest” which focus more specifically on Australian issues and cultural mores. Undercutting and exploding the usually detrimental and occasionally lethal American frontier myth, on the other hand, presents its own unique set of challenges.

2 During the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem contested the tribes’ roadblocks leading into the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge Reservations and threatened them with legal action to have them removed. Thankfully, there was legal precedent in Montana and she abandoned her efforts, but much rancor between the tribes and her administration remains.

3 O’Brien was born in Findlay, Ohio, but spent much of his adult life in the American West, teaching, writing, and hunting with his falcons. He moved permanently to South Dakota in the late 1980s.

4 This term emerged in the American public lexicon in the early twentieth century, appearing in print in the collection The Vanishing Race (1914). According to Gerald Vizenor, the collection’s photographer, Joseph Kossuth Dixon, participated in the Rodman Wanamaker expedition to Montana in 1913. Vizenor quotes Charles Reynolds, Jr.’s rationale for the expedition: “The Wanamaker expeditions took place at a time when the sense of national guilt about had been done to the Indians was rising . . . The Indians were seen as noble savages whom the white man had turned into a vanishing race” (133).

5 In Manifest Manners, Vizenor explains the durability and harmfulness of this stereotype, charging that “Manifest manners, however, have never understated the racialism of alcohol, or the savage simulations that the tribal other had the real burden, a genetic weakness to alcohol and civilization. Indians are the wild alcoholics in the literature of dominance . . . . The public has been hesitant to discern the real cost of alcoholism, and reluctant to abandon the stereotype of the drunken savage” (29).

6 See pp. 62-72 in Mountain City for Martin’s representation of Voyne, a pitiful, Paiute wino who hangs around Tremewan’s Store. Every month, Voyne spends his General Assistance check on rotgut wine and after it’s gone, he panhandles so that he can keep drinking. Martin acknowledges that Voyne is “the embodiment of a stereotype, a caricature, a distortion,” but carefully contrasts Voyne with other Natives in the book by capturing a key distinction: Martin’s Uncle Mel enjoys speaking Paiute and Shoshone with most Native customers but “doesn’t talk Paiute with Voyne” (72, 69). Voyne, Martin’s family and most Native and non-Native store patrons concur, is a lost cause. Martin’s brief inclusion of Voyne in the book thus works to draw attention to the dire Native American issue of alcoholism, rather than functioning as a sweeping stereotype.

7 In 2017, the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission did not renew the liquor licenses for Whiteclay’s four liquor stores. However, those who want and need alcohol so badly remain
determined to get it, and the problem of procuring it has now encompassed other regional communities such as Gordon, Nebraska. There are a number of quality sources that chronicle this sad saga, but please see *The Wounds of Whiteclay*, an especially salient resource produced by students in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

8 See Chapter 25, “Pa’s Bet,” in Wilder’s *By the Shores of Silver Lake*.

9 Mountaineer-philosopher Jack Turner explains this somewhat unintuitive relationship between the government and conservation in his book *Teewinot* (2000), in which he describes his view from the summit of the Grand Teton in stark, anticapitalist terms: “Farther west is the Teton Valley, or Pierre’s Hole, the place Jim Bridger thought was the finest valley in the American West. Ranching, farming, and logging have chopped it into squares; now it looks like someone took a knife to the face of a beautiful woman . . . From this bird’s eye view, the explanatory principle is simple: What was protected by a handful of nature’s patrons and the federal government remains beautiful; what was not protected has been forever despoiled for the benefit of a few” (110-11).

10 McGillycuddy’s ashes are interred on the summit of Black Elk (formerly Harney) Peak, South Dakota’s highest point. A brass plaque on his crypt reads “Valentine T. McGillycuddy / Wasicu Wakan / 1849-1939” in elegant script. Though it is still legible, vandals scratched out the word “wakan” (holy) in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, so that the plaque would read simply “wasicu” (white man, or more succinctly, fat eater). This act speaks to the ongoing settler colonial tensions in South Dakota and the sacred Black Hills at large, and also points to McGillycuddy’s fraught relationship with the Lakota people, which he saw as “progressive.”

11 O’Brien’s interpretation of McGillycuddy’s settler colonial philosophy may be overly rosy in *The Indian Agent*. O’Brien depicts him as a tough but reasonable ally to the Lakota people, while Wyoming historian Candy Moulton insists in her monograph that “It would take him years and engulf him in long-lasting controversy, but this young agent intended to follow the policy being dictated by the Office of Indian Affairs. He would push his charges toward assimilation into white civilization and away from tribal traditions” (162). He recants later than O’Brien would have us believe, after Wounded Knee, according to Moulton: “At Wounded Knee he believed the army had overplayed its hand. Surprisingly, he supported the rights of the Indians to their own beliefs, a break with his previous formal endorsement of federal Indian policy” (258).


13 In August 2021, the Rosebud Sioux Tribe won a major victory when the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 guaranteed the tribe the right to “competent” healthcare. Journalist Mary Annette Pember of the publication *Indian Country Today* quotes the court as ruling that: “In this specific case, the government must do better . . . The Treaty created a duty, reinforced by the Snyder Act and the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, for the government to provide competent, physician-led healthcare to the tribe and its members. We affirm” (Pember).
As another example of a white, male author killing off a Native character in South Dakota literature, consider Kent Meyers’ chapter “Losing to Win,” in his novel *Twisted Tree* (2009), published just a year before *Stolen Horses*. As I note in my dissertation introduction, Meyers kills off his only Native character of substance (with the exception of the mystical Natives in his epilogue) very early in the book.
Chapter Three

“As Long As the Story Gets Told”:

The Lakota As-Told-To Genre, Authenticity, and Mediated Authorship in Mary Brave Bird’s Lakota Woman and Ohitika Woman

In his novel Indian Killer (1996), Sherman Alexie’s character Marie Polatkin enters her Introduction to Native American Literature course on the first day of class, and discovers that not only is she the sole Native in the room but that the reading list is grossly compromised. In addition to various anthologies and nonfiction studies edited by white people, her Anglo professor has assigned:

The Education of Little Tree, [which] was supposedly written by a Cherokee Indian named Forrest Carter. But Forrest Carter was actually the pseudonym for a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Three of the other books, Black Elk Speaks, Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions, and Lakota Woman, were taught in almost every Native American Literature class in the country, and purported to be autobiographical, though all three were written by white men . . . After seeing the reading list, Marie knew that Dr. Mather was full of shit. (58-9)

This reading list suggests a fetishized, academic, settler colonial twist on imperialist nostalgia, Renato Rosaldo’s phrase which describes the peculiarity of “agents of colonialism” who “display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was ‘traditionally’” (107). Alexie’s list of texts pokes fun at co-opted, coauthored works, particularly the genre of (auto?)biography, commonly known to Native and non-Native critics as the notorious “as-told-to” genre, snapped up by white reader-settlers awash in imperialist nostalgia. While John G. Neihardt’s collaborative Black Elk Speaks (1932) is still lauded as an important text by some Native scholars, most notably Vine Deloria,
Jr., Richard Erdoes’s collaborations *Lame Deer* (1972) and *Lakota Woman* (1990), it seems, have become largely a literary joke.

In this chapter, I consider American Indian Movement (AIM) member Mary Brave Bird’s as-told-to texts *Lakota Woman* and *Ohitika Woman* (1993) and the controversy surrounding them in the contexts of authenticity and Lakota resistance literature. Both of Brave Bird’s books were co-authored with (and by some accounts, ghost-written by) Richard Erdoes, her Austrian-Hungarian friend and fellow AIM activist, and this collaboration raises numerous questions about authenticity and settler colonial invasions of Native American narratives. The Lakota as-told-to genre has a fairly lengthy history, beginning with *Black Elk Speaks*. According to Philip J. Deloria, “John Neihardt’s moving and sympathetic *Black Elk Speaks* set the trajectory in 1932, and if the quality of the writing has deteriorated, the model remains the same” (174). The genre reached full flower in the 1990s as AIM activists decided to share their stories with the world; nearly two decades after the AIM standoff at Wounded Knee in 1973, Brave Bird’s books appeared, followed by *Crow Dog* (1995), a collaboration between Erdoes and her former husband Leonard Crow Dog, as well as Russell Means’s *Where White Men Fear to Tread* (1995), co-written with Marvin J. Wolf. In this study, I focus primarily upon Brave Bird’s books for numerous reasons, and the first is that they remain, with the possible exception of *Black Elk Speaks*, the most popular and accessible of the Lakota as-told-to books.¹ Second, Brave Bird’s texts pose compelling critical questions because Brave Bird, unlike Black Elk and Leonard Crow Dog, was literate in English and capable of writing her story herself. Third, although her books have generated quite a bit of critical ire, including charges of inauthenticity and pandering to white readers, new and useful scholarship has appeared, particularly Channette Romero’s *Activism and the American Novel* (2012), which offers several “alternative reading strategies”
that I deploy to offer fresh readings of Brave Bird’s collaborative memoirs (Romero 31). And finally, by dint of her work with Erdoes, Brave Bird’s books present compelling challenges in terms of textual authenticity.

In some respects, it nearly seems as if Brave Bird’s detractors demand unsullied, authentic texts, and that they clamor for an authentic purity or a literary blood quantum. On the other hand, we might ask whether the books truly are compromised because of Erdoes’s participation, yielding mediated biographies that could be classified as, to use Gerald Vizenor’s phrase, the “literature of dominance” (29). In this chapter, I suggest that these books by Mary Brave Bird and Richard Erdoes, though they may be questionable in terms of authenticity, still have valuable, urgent knowledge about contemporary Native issues—such as missing and murdered Indigenous women, ceremonies, cultural appropriation, forced sterilization, alcoholism, and reservation life in the late twentieth century—to impart to readers and to future generations, and in that way, these books can be read as valuable narratives of Indigenous resistance. Brave Bird’s and Erdoes’s collaborative texts—whether we attempt to classify them as biography, autobiography, hagiography, or history—illustrate Gerald Vizenor’s notion of Native survivance in South Dakota and its literature, which is itself an act of resisting settler colonialism, and I interpret key moments in Brave Bird’s texts by weaving survivance into Romero’s alternative reading strategies of orality, spiritual ontology, and discursive characterization. In doing so, I highlight the complexities of a peculiar literary rift that shows just how deeply entrenched settler colonialism remains in South Dakota literature and culture, and I show that despite their perceived shortcomings, Brave Bird’s books do indeed have value in that they introduce readers to a complicated mélange of Native issues that go unspoken in contemporary settler culture.
Background: Mary Brave Bird and Her Collaborative Stories

Although Brave Bird’s books, particularly *Lakota Woman* are fairly well known, I want to open with some brief synopses and biographical background for context. Mary Brave Bird (1954-2013), also known as Mary Crow Dog, was a Sicangu (Brulé) Lakota activist who was born on the Rosebud Reservation. *Lakota Woman* is a Native activist bildungsroman of sorts, chronicling Brave Bird’s formative, boarding school and AIM experiences. In the distressing chapter “Civilize Them with a Stick,” we learn that she attended the Catholic boarding school for Native youths in St. Francis, South Dakota, where she bristled against authority and got into trouble for starting a muckraking newsletter about the school’s injustices. After leaving school, Brave Bird began to drift and slowly descend into alcoholism, and in the chapter “We AIM Not to Please,” she credits the burgeoning American Indian Movement with saving her life and helping her to find a more productive path. The book’s action peaks in the chapters “The Siege” and “Birth Giving,” her retelling of her experiences at the standoff at Wounded Knee in 1973, where she eventually gave birth to her son Pedro amid a constant barrage of gunfire from federal agents. After the Wounded Knee occupation, Brave Bird married Leonard Crow Dog, an AIM spiritual leader, and she becomes even more connected to Lakota traditions and ceremonies.

Brave Bird’s lesser-known, more contemplative sequel *Ohitika Woman* describes her time at Leonard’s ceremonial gathering place Crow Dog’s Paradise, traditional Lakota ceremonies, the Native American Church and her views on peyote, her gradual breakup with Leonard, her subsequent remarrying, and her version of Lakota feminism. The heart of *Ohitika Woman* is the long, searing, elegiac chapter, “Bleeding Always Stops If You Press Down Hard Enough,” which laments settler invasion and the decline of Lakota culture, and memorializes her missing and murdered indigenous friends, including her fellow AIM member Annie Mae Aquash.
who was found dead along Highway 73 on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a bullet hole in her skull. Both books adopt a somewhat casual tone to tell this multitude of heartbreakingly grim stories about major events like the Wounded Knee occupation but also the particularities of Brave Bird’s difficult, everyday life on the Rosebud Reservation. These texts employ plenty of slang and casual phrasing, ostensibly to retain the quality of the oral tradition, though Erdoes did tinker with Brave Bird’s phrasing enough to elicit her initial kneejerk response against possible charges of inauthenticity: “Gee whiz, I don’t talk like this” (Wise and Wise). Brave Bird’s surprised reaction to Erdoes’s draft apparently faded quickly, eclipsed by her desire to put her story into the world. As Larissa Petrillo explains in Being Lakota: Identity and Tradition on Pine Ridge Reservation (2007), “Mary Crow Dog [Brave Bird] herself has not objected to Erdoes’s manipulations of the text. She stresses that making the information known is more critical than authorship concerns” (34).

Though John G. Neihardt began the Lakota as-told-to genre with Black Elk Speaks, Brave Bird’s co-author Richard Erdoes (1912-2008) perfected it, typing and editing Brave Bird’s two books as well as John (Fire) Lame Deer’s narrative Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions and Leonard Crow Dog’s autobiography Crow Dog; in addition, Erdoes also co-wrote AIM leader Dennis Banks’s story Ojibwa Warrior (2004).3 Erdoes led a long and fascinating life; born in Germany, he fled the Nazis and relocated to the United States in 1939. Erdoes’s interest in and advocacy for the Lakota people began with an assignment for the publication Life in the 1960s, which in turn would ignite a long-standing allyship with the American Indian Movement. According to his biography in the guide to his papers at Yale:

By the mid-1960s, Erdoes was illustrating and publishing his own children’s stories while continuing to build his freelance career. During an assignment to photograph American
Indian reservation life for *Life*, Erdoes became deeply intrigued by contemporary Native American life and spirituality. Outraged by his first-hand experience of conditions on reservations and fascinated by the American Indian belief systems he encountered, Erdoes wrote, illustrated, and edited a number of adult and children's books on American Indian cultures, folklore, and life over the next four decades. He became a passionate advocate for American Indian civil rights, and an avid documenter of tribal life and spiritual revitalization, particularly among the Lakota. (Richard Erdoes Papers 6)

This magazine assignment altered the trajectory of his life, becoming not only the impetus for his burgeoning allyship with the Lakotas, but also inspiring a change in artistic medium. Originally a visual artist, Erdoes became a writer by default after this magazine assignment to South Dakota, where he met John Lame Deer. According to the introduction to *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*:

> When *Life* magazine sent him to do a photo essay on Indian reservations, he was befriended ‘by an old and almost totally illiterate Sioux medicine man.’ This was Lame Deer . . . Lame Deer wanted Erdoes to write his life story. Although the artist protested that he was not a writer, he finally yielded to Lame Deer’s insistence . . . Erdoes gives credit to Lame Deer’s powerful ‘medicine’ for having turned him into an author of more than a dozen books, saying that ‘it was John [Lame Deer] who actually made me a writer, originally almost against my will. (ix-x)

That “more than a dozen books” mentioned in this 1994 introduction expanded to a grand total of 23 books prior to his death in 2008. While most of his books involve Native American narratives or collected tales, other works in his oeuvre include *Peddlers and Vendors around the World* (1967), *Tales from the American Frontier* (1992) and *Saloons of the Old West* (1997). An ardent supporter of AIM, Erdoes offered his spare room to Mary Brave Bird so she could stay with him
during Leonard’s incarceration in Pennsylvania following Wounded Knee. She stayed for nearly a year, and during that time, she taped the stories that Erdoes transformed into the *Lakota Woman* manuscript.

**Native American Literature and Problems with Authenticity as a Critical Criterion**

Although taping and typing a houseguest’s oral stories might seem rather innocuous, the debate over and dismissal of Brave Bird’s books continues, and I want to turn now to the fraught notion of *authenticity*, a concept overly laden with supposed importance in Western and Native American literature, so that my readers can fully appreciate the breadth and depth of this heated discussion. *Authenticity*, broadly, has multiple meanings in literary criticism, and in Western literature in particular, becomes a very slippery signifier. In their introduction to the edited collection *True West* (2004), William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis explain: “There are few terms at play in the history of this vast region that have as wide a reach and relevance, and there is no other region in America that is as haunted by the elusive appeal, legitimating power, and nostalgic pull of authenticity, whether with regard to ethnicity, cultural artifacts, or settings” (1). In other disciplines, authenticity has vastly different implications; in queer theory, for example, authenticity tends to be a positive goal, meaning, perhaps, someone coming out of the closet to live their best life or affirming their gender identity at long last. In queer theory and many other disciplines and modes of inquiry, authenticity has a tendency to be conflated with personal, social, and historical truth. In Western American literature, however, authenticity connotes multiple problems in authorship. Authenticity in Western literature, in fact, often becomes a faulty mode of literary gate-keeping. This practice reflects, largely, rural, suburban, and exurban Western American cultures; as Nancy Cook observes in her essay “The Only Real Indians Are Western Ones” (2004), “For the American and Canadian wests, where contact between cultures
dominates the historical narrative from at least the sixteenth century forward, authenticity continues to be claimed to assert ‘insider’ status for ‘outsiders’ and to keep newer ‘outsiders’ at bay or powerless” (143). That coveted insider status can make or break a Western writer; an autobiographical Western pedigree carries a disproportionate amount of weight, as does the ability to render the details of a place in a way the locals recognize or—and this is an even harder task—approve of. No other genre or region in American literature, in fact, demands to know the bona fides of their writers and judges their works so harshly because of them, and so hewing to authenticity as a validating or invalidating criterion continues, though this practice has finally begun to receive a fair amount of criticism and pushback in recent years.

In Native American literature, authenticity becomes even more complicated since it adds layers of temporality, cultural appropriation, and settler colonial perception to the mix. For Susan Bernardin, authenticity has ominous implications, both in contemporary Native culture and in its literature, functioning, for one thing, as a benchmark for determining tribal exclusion by the U.S. government. As Bernardin points out in “The Authenticity Game” (2004), “authenticity has long been wielded as a mode of containment. For example, the fiction of blood quantum enacted by the federal government . . . sought to replace indigenous conceptions of tribal membership with racialized and exclusionary ones” (160). Historically, Bernardin asserts, the United States’ settler colonial government imposed their authenticity criteria upon indigenous peoples to determine distribution of goods promised by treaties, land titles, tribal enrollment cards, and more. This valuation of pedigreed authenticity has leached into studies of Native literature as well, and Bernardin blames not only the exploitative fraudsters posing as indigenous writers but the American historical pattern of appropriation:
It is precisely because of the dominant culture’s pervasive and deeply entrenched pattern of what Philip Deloria calls ‘playing Indian,’—by taking ownership of Native land, history, culture, and now spiritual traditions—that such literary fakes are so insidious. In recent years, writers and editors in Indian Country have ‘outed’ an array of authorial frauds who have generated self-help books, seminars, and novels for eager audiences. (161).

The problem of Native authenticity in literature, according to Bernardin, is widespread and mirrors settler colonial appropriation and theft.

Another key strand of the authenticity debate in Native works has to do with temporality and representation. David L. Moore takes a slightly different tack than Bernardin, arguing in *That Dream Shall Have a Name* (2014) that authenticity in Native literature usually has to do with popular perceptions of pre-Contact, prelapsarian aborigines, their cultures, and the absurd notion that Natives have vanished, nowhere to be found in contemporary American life. He explains:

Instead of a dull and tiresome topic, authenticity—as it actually functions in many Indigenous narratives—works toward a summary of the discussion. It goes to the heart of America’s binary thinking in space (manifest) and time (destiny), which would set “authentic Indians” as past and vanished from the land (225).

Here Moore points out the folly and dangers of judging Native literature by whether the reader deems a text authentic, or to put it more succinctly, whether the text represents indigeneity as perpetually-vanishing noble savagery. One reason that authenticity continues to constitute literary quicksand, he posits, is the performative nature of authenticity, and another is readers’ expectations and biases. Moore asks,
Who is to decide, declare, delineate what is authentically “Indian”? The self or the community? The text or the context? The colonized or the colonizer? The performer or the spectator? Such questions become a matter of survival when the dominant definition of authenticity is temporal, placing Native Americans in the past and eclipsing their presence by eclipsing their present. (226)

Moore’s questions in this passage underscore the reader’s outsized role in perpetuating, to borrow Bernadin’s phrase, the authenticity game. Mary Brave Bird’s books, as we shall see, have garnered plenty of critical wrath from several directions, and part of the problem is that her books don’t fulfill her audience’s expectations for authenticity.

**Brave Bird’s Texts and the Tradition of Lakota Literary Activism**

Moore’s observations regarding temporality, however, allow us a different way to think about Brave Bird’s books, particularly given her recounting of Wounded Knee II and her experiences with contemporary Native issues and more recent traumas, including poverty, rape, police brutality, anti-Native sentiment in South Dakota, and forced sterilization of Lakota women in the 1970s. These books, though co-written, certainly trend toward literary activism not only because they chronicle AIM’s occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 but also since they bring contemporary Native issues to a wider audience. As Moore asserts, “With an activist agenda, Native writers have struggled to redefine America from the start, because America is built on the vanishing of Indians” (4). Publishing books, then, is tantamount to an act of resistance in that it asserts sovereignty and refutes the misperception of the vanishing Indian. Moore explains, “When Native writers publish, they pose the fundamental question of what would change if America were to accept the fact that Indians never vanished and never will” (20). Native works that assert indigenous presences in contemporary American life thus constitute resistance
literature and function as a necessary testament to sovereignty and to *survivance*, Gerald Vizenor’s term for Native works that rebuke settler colonial structures and which Vizenor defines in *Manifest Manners* (1999) as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (vi). Vizenor terms the flipside of survivance *manifest manners*, a phrase which strikes at the heart of the settler colonial conditions underpinning white audiences’ insatiable appetite for stories of noble savages, polite assimilation into settler culture, and potentially the admittedly mediated Lakota as-told-to genre. While his book *Manifest Manners* is a decidedly postmodern text with multiple definitions of that phrase replicating and simulating in Baudrillardean ways, his most helpful and straightforward definitions of manifest manners are that they “are the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that are read as the authentic and sustained as representations of Native American Indians” (5-6).

Yet Brave Bird’s books assert that the Lakota people have not vanished and chronicle her resistance against settler domination, so in that forgiving light, we can read her books as powerful and perhaps even authentic pieces of Lakota activist literature: stories of survivance rather than of manifest manners. But at the same time, those questions of authenticity—particularly a set of charges levied by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn against the entire Lakota as-told-to genre—continue to dog Brave Bird’s works because of her white collaborator Richard Erdoes. Brave Bird herself seemed unbothered by Erdoes’s role in her books’ publication, declaring in a 1998 interview that her main concern involved not book sales or fame, but the opportunity to tell her story *at all*. She told interviewers Christopher Wise and R. Todd Wise that she didn’t mind Erdoes’s help but in fact welcomed it, reiterating in “Mary Brave Bird Speaks: A Brief Interview” (1998): “Like I said, it’s all right, just as long as it gets read” (Wise and Wise). Brave
Bird implies with this statement that her story is urgent and absolutely must be told, no matter the hit her authenticity might take, and that by telling it, *Lakota Woman* can do its crucial activist work and perhaps reach a wide-ranging audience who might in turn enact change.

Lakota and Dakota literature has a long, proud history of activist authors, and I want to briefly shift away from Brave Bird and offer a highly abridged but pertinent survey of a handful of these writers—who needed no collaborators—to help exemplify the tradition that still excludes Brave Bird’s books, and to underscore the potential and overlapping problems inherent to the as-told-to genre in terms of authenticity, her outsider status, and the ways these notions intersect with settler colonialism. The trajectory of Lakota and Dakota literary activism began at the turn of the twentieth century with Zitkala-Ša, a Yankton Dakota writer also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin. Born in 1876, the same year as the Battle of the Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn) and educated at a Quaker boarding school, Zitkala-Ša would go on to use the colonizer’s language in an attempt to re-enfranchise her people and preserve her culture.

According to Ruth Spack in her essay “Re-Visioning Sioux Women” (1997), “Zitkala-Ša was among those whom the [assimilative boarding school] system labeled success stories—until she began to use the English language in subversive ways” (26). Zitkala-Ša held a wide variety of occupations, all centered by her activism and cultural preservation, and in addition to her short stories and essays, she also wrote poetry, speeches, and an opera. Zitkala-Ša scholar P. Jane Hafen catalogues her numerous professions and talents in her article “Help Indians Help Themselves” (2013), noting that “she was a teacher, a musical performer, a writer, an employee of the Indian Service (forerunner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs), a public speaker, a major player in the Society of American Indians (SAI), and the president of the National Council of American Indians (NCAI)” (199). Her teaching job was at the infamous Carlisle Indian Industrial
School, and she finally left after one too many heated arguments with Richard Henry Pratt himself.  

Zitkala-Ša is primarily known for her collections *Old Indian Legends* (1901), and *American Indian Stories* (1921), and while these works did modestly fulfill her aims of preserving sacred trickster tales, chronicling her upbringing during the tumultuous late 19th century, and articulating problems faced by Native Americans in the Assimilation Era of the early twentieth century, her ardent activism truly emerges in her later essays and speeches. Yet in *American Indian Stories*, Zitkala-Ša subtly lays the groundwork for activism into her narrative by didactically pointing out pressing issues in need of redress, as we see in her succinct explanation of settler colonial land theft from a child’s perspective in her essay “Impressions of an Indian Childhood.” She recalls, “We were once very happy. But the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us away” (4). This didactic form of narratological activism persists throughout the collection, crescendoing to a more bombastic form in her muckraking piece “America’s Indian Problem” about the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in which, prior to launching into the BIA’s defects, she demands of the reader, “Do you know what your Bureau of Indian Affairs, in Washington, D.C. really is? How it is organized and how it deals with wards of the nation? This is our first study” (81). This more strident tone and activist agenda reemerges in many of her later works not included in *American Indian Stories*; Hafen, in fact, compiled these once widely scattered articles, essays, speeches, editorials, and Congressional statements into the collection *Help Indians Help Themselves: The Later Writings of Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)* (2020). Zitkala-Ša’s article “What It Means to Be an Indian Today,” for example, first published in the *Friends’ Intelligencer* in 1929, bemoans the lack of good schools for Native children and agitates for Americans to honor the
treaties and do better. Consider, for instance, the passage in which she chastises Congress misappropriating funds for trivial matters rather than education:

> The Indian would have fared far better had his tribal funds be used for better schools for his race instead of being used to build tourist bridges and highways through the plenary power of Congress. Yet recently when I made this statement publicly a Bishop of South Dakota depreciatingly said “We wouldn’t know what to do with so many (better schools).” (Hafen Help, ch. 3)

Here we see a stark example of just one facet of Native disenfranchisement by the federal government, and although that foolish comment by the Bishop commands plenty of attention for its idiocy and boorishness, it was ultimately a response to her public statement. Memorializing this unhappy instance in print allows her to get her message to an even broader—and hopefully more receptive—audience. Furthermore, Zitkala-Ša further reveals her activist aims at the close of this article with a blatant, rallying cry that beseeches her readers to do their civic duty and vote for new policymakers: “Oh please America, send Christian statesmen to Congress! Demand justice for our Indian today!” (Hafen Help, ch. 3). Fresh members of Congress, she hopes, would understand the value of educating Native children without decimating their culture as Pratt and his contemporaries attempted to do.

Like Zitkala-Ša, Ella Cara Deloria (1889-1971), was a Yankton Dakota writer who sought justice for her people through education and language. Though not quite the overt public agitator that Zitkala-Ša was, Deloria was a formidable literary and scientific force in her own right, publishing *The Wohpe Festival* (1928), *The Sun Dance of the Oglala Sioux* (1929), *Dakota Texts* (1932), *Dakota Grammar* (1941), and *Speaking of Indians* (1944), all of which were anthropological in nature and sought to preserve her culture. As Susan Gardner declares in her
Deloria also generated multiple works in several disciplines that went unpublished and worked assiduously on an enormous Dakota-English dictionary, still unfinished at the time of her death. Deloria wrote fiction privately, beginning work on her novel Waterlily in the early 1940s although she resisted publishing it, and it remained unpublished until 1988, 17 years after her death.

Despite Deloria’s reluctance to publish her novel, Waterlily became an enormously important text in the Great Plains canon. In Waterlily, Deloria recreates life in a Dakota camp circle in the late 19th century, and the novel works to preserve traditional, pre-Contact ways and capture the disorientation of Natives as settler colonialism takes hold, and at the same time, Deloria occasionally imagines how things could have been if American settlers had not invaded their lands at all. The book exemplifies Deloria’s literary activism, which was rooted in her belief that a lack of cultural understanding gave rise to the intense friction between Natives and settlers. In her introduction to the Bison Books Kindle edition of Waterlily, Gardner explains, “She always felt that if she could explain Indians to white people and white people to Indians, the future of Indians might be less rocky and discriminatory. Like any other American Indian writer one can think of, she was writing for her people’s survival, not composing their obituary” (E. Deloria, introduction). Maria Eugenia Cotera presses further, arguing in her essay “All My Relatives Are Noble” (2004) that Waterlily narratologically and linguistically advances Dakota feminism and envisions settler decolonization. She asserts that “Deloria’s choice to focus on
women in Waterlily was a consummately political one and that it represented (for its time) a fundamentally new approach to the project of tribal survival” (53).

Indeed, cultural preservation and survivance are paramount in Deloria’s novel, and her anthropological training informs the very particular details in Waterlily, as we see, as merely one example, in her representations of the Sun Dance and at the same time, her fiction humanizes her culture for her non-Native audiences, rendering them as reverent people with full ranges of human foibles rather than one-dimensional, bloodthirsty savages with strange and heathenish religious practices, or silent, wise noble savages. Consider, for example, Deloria’s description of preparations for the sacred ceremony, in which the tribe selects who will cut down the Sun Dance pole:

The time had come to cut the tree. This cutting was an honor, too, and was performed by eight beloved young people, four youths and four maidens. When they were summoned to the fore, the youths stepped out of the crowd promptly, and then two girls, reluctant from shyness, emerged slowly and took their places. But where were the other two?” (E. Deloria, ch. 11).

Her description records the particulars of the Sun Dance for Native readers—and during the Assimilation Era of the early twentieth century, Deloria may have feared that these details could be lost as Lakota and Dakota youths were carted off to boarding schools—and this passage gives non-Native readers a sense of not only the intense preparation for the Sun Dance ceremony but also that these youths and maidens were eager and full of bravado, or shy enough to appear meek or even to temporarily hide. Deloria attempts, in this passage and in this book, to ensure that this important ceremony and other key religious practices will endure and that the settler culture of that time period might rethink their having discouraged them. 7
The Deloria name, in fact, is synonymous with Dakota and Lakota literary activism; Ella’s nephew, Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933-2005), is perhaps the best-known writer of this activist genre. Born in Martin, South Dakota, and an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, Deloria was an author, an academic, an agitator, and an attorney who anticipated the American Indian Movement and the corresponding need for lawyers who specialize in Native issues and laws. Holly Boomer, professor of English at Oglala Lakota College, explains in Writing Red (2000) that “Deloria, as a former executive director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and the founder of the Institute for the Development of Indian Law, was active as a defense attorney and an expert witness at the Wounded Knee trials as well as helping other tribes with political and legal conflicts” (14). But impressive as his legal accomplishments are, his books comprise perhaps his most enduring legacy. Deloria was a prolific writer, publishing more than 20 books, including Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto (1969), Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties (1974), God Is Red: A Native View of Religion (1994), and Red Earth, White Lies (1995) during his lifetime, and he also edited several anthologies. His subject matter addresses a staggeringly wide range of Native issues; as Boomer explains in her eulogizing tribute “Writing Red” (2006), “Deloria spent his writing career articulating problems, historical and contemporary, that have beleaguered American Indians. Disempowerment, subversion of Indian ways to white ways, disenfranchisement, self-determination, and loss of culture are some of the primary issues that Deloria addresses in his many books and lectures” (113).

For our purposes here with chronicling Lakota and Dakota literary activism, I want to underscore Deloria’s extensive efforts to re-empower Native peoples through his writing. Deloria anticipated a Red Power movement in the 1960s, and I cannot emphasize enough how
enormously important his books and philosophies were to the burgeoning American Indian Movement in the 1970s and beyond. Yet while his were certainly inspirational to those core activists, he also drew more general audiences into the conversation with his vital affirmations and thought-provoking observations. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a formidable literary activist in her own right, notes in her tribute “Comments for Vine Deloria, Jr. upon his Early and Untimely Death” (2005) that “He was not one to blame the victim, and his words helped us toward an intellectual awakening that confirms our worthiness as First Nations to this land” (150). Deloria spoke truth to power, writing against the dominant frontier myth guiding American Indian policy. For example, in his chapter “Laws and Treaties” in Custer Died for Your Sins, Deloria turns the tables upon common white assumptions about Natives, broken treaties, and land theft, laying the unrevised, historical truth bare for his readers: “Often when discussing treaty rights with whites, Indians find themselves being told that ‘We gave you the land and you haven’t done anything with it’ . . . The truth is that practically the only thing the white men ever gave the Indian was disease and poverty. To imply that Indians were given land is to completely reverse the facts of history” (35). But despite his deadly-serious and seemingly hopeless settler colonial subject matter, part of Deloria’s appeal to such wide-ranging audiences very likely lies in his dark and dry humor. Vine Deloria, Jr., to put it mildly, is at times a very humorous literary trickster. In Custer, for example, Deloria begins the second paragraph of his first chapter with the declaration that “One of the finest things about being an Indian is that people are always interested in you and your ‘plight.’ Other groups have difficulties, predicaments, quandaries, problems, or troubles. Traditionally we Indians have had a ‘plight’” (1). Here Deloria snarkily rejects the popular perception of Native victimization by white culture in general and anthropologists in particular, proudly refusing white sympathy for the current state of Native
affairs; justice, he implies, would be a more appropriate reparation. Deloria’s searing wit, in fact, gives readers a way to approach very daunting and tangled issues of settler colonialism in the United States; as he puts it in his chapter “Indian Humor,” “The more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it” (Custer 147). Since he was the first Native writer to catalogue and articulate these wide-ranging issues, it is fitting that he relied on humor to such a degree since the problems were—and are—so vast. His focus upon these crucial issues laid the groundwork not only for AIM in the 1970s, but for the water protectors and land defenders of the twenty-first century.

And today, a current crop of Lakota and Dakota activist-writers continues the crucial work of chronicling Native issues and unsettling settler colonialism. I want to briefly touch upon two contemporary and particularly noteworthy authors before turning to my consideration of Mary Brave Bird: Nick Estes and poet Layli Long Soldier. No one has chronicled the #NoDAPL protests of 2016-17 more thoroughly than Estes, who is a professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, an enrolled member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, and a co-founder of the resistance organization The Red Nation. He has published numerous book chapters and essays about Standing Rock, as well as the book *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (2019) and he also co-edited the collection *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (2019). Estes’s publications prove that activism is not only something that happens on the ground but also in Native nonfiction. In *Our History*, for example, Estes situates his harrowing, first-person accounts of the pipeline companies’ transgressions in North Dakota and the brutal police response that supported them within the longer, historical trajectory of broken treaties, the Pick-Sloan plan, the American Indian Movement, and more, and he does
not mince words in his powerful, accusatory prose. Estes opens his third chapter, “War,” for example, with a very succinct and cutting definition of settler colonialism which undercuts over a century of revisionist history and accepted frontier mythology: “The history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism whereby an imperial power seizes Native territory, eliminates the original people by force, and resettles the land with a foreign, invading population” (Estes, ch. 3). His tidy, one-sentence definition challenges both Native and non-Native readers to grapple with that dominant, revisionist history and its peddlers. And in addition to his chronologizing of the numerous historical traumas which culminated in the #NoDAPL protests, Estes explores the complexity and brutality of American settler colonialism, interrogating the ideologies undergirding its durable structure. Consider, for instance, this compelling passage from Estes in his prologue to Our History Is the Future, in which he traces capitalism’s sordid relationships with indigeneity, nonhuman lives, and settler colonialism:

Mni Wiconi and these Indigenous ways of relating to human and other-than-human life exist in opposition to capitalism, which transforms both humans and nonhumans into labor and commodities to be bought and sold. These ways of relating also exist in opposition to capitalism’s twin, settler colonialism, which calls for the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and their other-than-human kin. (Estes “Prologue”)

Here Estes lays out the unresolvable tension between Indigenous cultures, the natural world, and late capitalism, illustrating the parallels between capitalist enterprise and its codependent, co-enabling cousin, settler colonialism. This passage too, exemplifies Estes’s activism through writing, for like so many other crucial moments in his book, this assertion has the potential to stop readers in their tracks. Moments like these demand that we occasionally pivot from an accretive, historical reading strategy to a more pondering, philosophical approach.
Poet and artist Layli Long Soldier is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and has published the chapbook *Chromosomary* (2010) and the full-length collection *Whereas* (2017). Long Soldier has won numerous awards for her work, including, according to the blurb on the back cover of *Whereas*, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a Native Arts and Cultures Foundation National Artist Fellowship, and a Whiting Award. Long Soldier’s poetry, too, is a form of literary activism—Estes, in fact, excerpted Long Soldier’s “Resolution 6” in his edited collection *Standing with Standing Rock*, published there simply as “Resolutions”—and we could classify her work as such on both poetic and hermeneutic grounds. Long Soldier pushes the linguistic boundaries of the colonizer’s language in compelling directions in *Whereas*, and, at the same time, she responds to a complex, intertwined multitude of Native America’s contemporary and historical issues, including land theft and historical trauma. For example, in her poem “38,” Long Soldier plaintively recounts the hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato, Minnesota, a public execution ordered by President Lincoln in 1862 in response to an uprising. In lines 5-9, Long Soldier flatly declares:

You may like to know, I do not consider this a “creative piece.”

I do not regard this as a poem of great imagination or a work of fiction.

Also, historical events will not be dramatized for an “interesting read.”

Therefore, I feel most responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought.

That said, I will begin.

You may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38. (49)

Long Soldier goes on to explain the circumstances surrounding this large, public execution and to elegize the murdered Dakota warriors, but even in those initial lines, she pushes back against revisionist history. There is no need to dramatize this horrific event ordered by Lincoln, which
took place, as she notes in line 17, the same week he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. And in her line “You may or may not have heard about the Dakota 38,” Long Soldier highlights the sorry fact that most white Americans do not know about the Dakota 38; Native history, in most public institutions in South Dakota, is largely offered as an elective rather than a requirement. Furthermore, her telling of the uprising and subsequent execution, too, continues to call out not only the mass hanging and our continuing ignorance of it, but also the complex, multi-pronged ways that settler colonialism has been institutionalized in the United States. In her lines which give the uprising’s backstory, she writes, “It could be said, this [treaty] money was payment for the land the Dakota ceded; for living within assigned boundaries (a reservation); and for relinquishing rights to their vast hunting territory which, in turn, made Dakota people dependent on other means to survive: money. / The previous sentence is circular, akin to so many aspects of history” (51). Here Long Soldier’s “previous sentence” brilliantly mirrors the brutal circularity of settler colonial causality, and her pausing in the next line to point that out underscores it further, asking the reader to attempt to think through the genocidal logic of the 19th century U.S. government.

All of these aforementioned Lakota and Dakota writers, of course, deserve more sustained readings in essays, chapters, and monographs, but I include them here to underscore the rich tradition of Native activism and resistance in South Dakota literature. I am certainly omitting many other important names, such as Luther Standing Bear, Philip Deloria, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (who we will encounter later in this chapter), but my overarching points are that all of these authors are “authentic” Lakota and Dakota resistance writers who have made important contributions to the survivance canon on their own terms. Not one of them utilized a white co-author.
Lakota Collaborative Texts: Authenticity and a Myriad of Complaints

Yet the as-told-to genre constitutes a disorientingly sizable chunk of Lakota literature and appeals to a very wide audience, who in turn might rethink the dominant settler paradigm, and thus these books, too, might potentially function as activist texts. Though these collaborative books comprise an exceptionally weird and complex genre, they are not entirely without value, as I attempt to show later in this chapter. However, the list of grievances against the “as-told-to” genre and, by extension, Brave Bird’s books, is long and varied. Some of the as-told-to books’ detractors pose fairly flimsy and ultimately dismissible arguments since they lean so heavily upon static notions of authenticity to set up their flawed syllogisms. For example, in his essay “A Ventriliquy of Anthros” (1994), Julian Rice makes direct charges against Erdoes, Brave Bird, and Lame Deer, carping that Erdoes’s representations of Brave Bird’s and of John Fire Lame Deer’s contemporary views and attitudes do not align with strict Lakota cultural traditions and are thus inauthentic. Though he spends most of his essay deriding Erdoes for his work with Lame Deer, he devotes a few pages to discounting Brave Bird’s stories. For example, he complains that Brave Bird and Erdoes’s recounting of AIM members’ gender roles in the 1970s do not perfectly match pre-Contact Lakota traditions, even going so far as to use Ella Deloria’s anthropological work to blast Brave Bird and Erdoes. He writes, “Erdoes’ female persona may or not be the real Mary Crow Dog, but her comments on the status of Sioux women, as having to do all of the work without real respect from men is simply false, as attested to by both oral tradition and the written record” (174). Rice’s scathing litany of mostly dismissible complaints exemplify David Moore’s observation that in Native literature, authenticity is representationally enacted by discounting Native contemporaneity and ignoring inevitable changes to cultures and traditions brought on by settler colonization.
Other complainants’ palpable disgust with the as-told-to genre at large seems more justifiable, given the unequal balance of power in a settler state. In her essay “Native Life Stories and ‘Authorship’: Legal and Ethical Issues” (1997), Lenora Ledwon points out that “When such a life story is, as often happens, written in collaboration with a non-Native editor, translator, or transcriber, the commodification and objectification of the Other becomes a real possibility. This hazard of appropriation is always present when a text is the product of two unequally powerful cultures” (579). The danger here, according to Ledwon, is that as-told-to texts could potentially reify Native Otherness to non-Native readers rather than humanize Native subjects. While Ledwon’s concern is certainly valid, she seems to overlook the potential ramifications of such a text—compromised though it may be—not existing at all; silencing a Native narrative seems far more aggressive and utterly harmful than producing a text that could be susceptible to a fetishizing reader’s subjective misinterpretation. Still another problem lies in the reading public’s vociferous appetite for these as-told-to texts. Susan Bernardin gestures toward capitalism as a primary culprit undergirding the fetishization of Native subject positions: “The popularity of contemporary ‘as-told-to’ autobiographies, such as those by Lame Deer, Mary Crow Dog [Brave Bird], and Leonard Crow Dog, all produced in collaboration with Richard Erdoes, attests to the continued market appeal of Native texts whose premise is ethnographic and cultural self-disclosure” (157). Edward Valandra goes further by twinning marketing strategies and sales of these books with colonialism. In his essay “The As-Told-To Native [Auto]Biography” (2005), he charges that this style of Native autobiography offers “little more than supermarket tabloids for the academy” which subsequently “perpetuates colonialism-tinted misrepresentations” (104). White writers’ cultural distortions invariably creep into their very marketable books, and critics fear that the books’ Native subjects become yet another construction of manifest manners: one of
Vizenor’s unchanging, small-i *indians*, whom he calls “the tragic archives of dominance and victimry” in his preface to *Manifest Manners*, replicating again and again in literature for white readers (x). But these arguments by Bernadin and Valandra, too, are rife with problems: first, they dismiss the economic realities of Native—and particularly Lakota—collaborators, as South Dakota reservations are notorious for being the most destitute in the nation, and while the collaborator was still living, any money garnered from book sales would very likely be extremely welcome. Moreover, in the pre-social media era, these as-told-to books served as a way to circulate stories that would probably have otherwise gone untold.

Yet as the ramifications of settler colonialism grind on and on via these misrepresentations and simulations, many critics charge that the possibilities of meaningful introspection on the part of the settler-audience as well as practical solutions to contemporary Native issues recede. In Valandra’s view, since these books are “laden with cultural bias and an embedded white agenda . . . such books reveal that non-Natives are more enamored with Native people and less concerned about how white colonialism adversely affects Native society” (113). In her review of the text *Life and Death in the Mainstream of American Indian Biography* (1995), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn echoes Valandra’s concerns and goes further, railing against the “as-told-to” genre—though not by attacking Brave Bird and Erdoes directly—in her accusations that white editor-writers and Native informants generate not autobiographies or biographies, but *hagiographies* (life stories of saints), which recount, almost invariably, “how the white man took over the land and how the Indians themselves, alas, fell to drinking great quantities of booze, committing debaucheries of various kinds, and emerging from such a hapless condition, rhetorically at least, redeemed and at the edge of self-knowledge” (90). While *Black Elk Speaks* does not model this particular, boozy formula, Cook-Lynn’s observation tidily sums up the plots
of many later “hagiographies,” especially those coauthored by American Indian Movement (AIM) participants such as Dennis Banks, Russell Means, Leonard Crow Dog, and Mary Brave Bird. Furthermore, these books, according to Cook-Lynn, offer little in the way of practical solutions to contemporary Native issues:

After “a good read” in the Indian-based hagiography milieu, there is little real understanding of the political pathology which is at the heart of American Indian experience. The seeds of continuing crises in our Indian communities, while laid bare and exposed, are given little cause-and-effect analysis, thus, no problem-solving model will emerge from these fields of inquiry. The meticulous, heart rending examination of Indian failure by writers who may or may not know they are from the world of colonial masters is depressing and distasteful. (Review 92)

To make matters worse, these “depressing and distasteful,” analysis- and solution-free books, of course, are written in English—the settlers’ language. I will argue that Brave Bird's books should not be dismissed as “depressing and distasteful” hagiographies later in this chapter in my application of Romero’s alternative reading strategies, but for now, I simply want to point out a grievous flaw in Cook-Lynn’s logic: these as-told-to books do expose these “seeds of continuing crisis” to non-Native readers, who might otherwise be completely unaware of them. Cook-Lynn underestimates current non-Native readers’ obliviousness, while her frustration with a lack of “cause-and-effect analysis” seems hopelessly fixed in time, with no faith at all in future generations to address those seeds of crises.

Yet another strand of this genre’s tangle of issues involves complicated questions of voice and its connection to authenticity, which Bernadin astutely identifies as “a defining problem of Native American literary studies” (160). Consider, for instance, the possible writing
processes of these “as-told-to” books. In her essay “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story” (1996), Cook-Lynn makes the spurious claim that prescriptive, biased interviews invariably underpin these writing processes: “In the telling of these stories, the writer almost always takes sides with the ‘informant,’ who gives him/her specific answers to specific questions” (66). Brave Bird’s collaborations with Erdoes, however, buck this prescriptive format outlined by Cook-Lynn, and Brave Bird describes their writing process as a modern offshoot of the oral tradition, though marred by inadvertent oversharing. She admits ceding occasional control to Erdoes in her interview with Christopher Wise and R. Todd Wise: “I record and say a lot, and we work through the tapes. We work together pretty good, but sometimes he’ll put in stuff I didn’t want anyone to know . . . That is the problem with having a ghost writer. Because they will allow certain things for the audience, to try and capture them” (Wise and Wise). The audience, as I suggest earlier, buy the books and enable settler colonialism by means of misrepresentation and misinterpretation, and in Brave Bird’s statement, we can see the performative nature of these books, with its ties to fraught questions of authenticity and capitulations to their perceived audiences. As Moore puts it, “Because of the performative nature of authenticity, where the audience, a reader, an ethnographer, or a critic plays a key role in defining what authentic is, that interactive dynamic leaves authenticity open to infinite misreadings” (226-7). It seems, then, that Erdoes lets the audience’s subjective notions of what constitutes authenticity dictate the terms of disclosure—and, of course, what will sell more books. Brave Bird, as I pointed out earlier in this chapter, seemed unperturbed by potential problems of authenticity; in that same interview, she notes that while she would mildly protest some of Erdoes’s rephrasing, telling him that certain phrases sounded too formal and didn’t quite sound like something she would say, he would reassure her, and her desire to be heard eclipsed
any trepidation she had. Brave Bird, as we have seen in her interview with Wise and Wise, felt strongly that collaborating with Erdoes was not an authorial or cultural transgression, as long as she could reach an audience with her story. Her statement tacitly implies that she didn’t mind having her grammar cleaned up or tinkered with in the least. And ultimately, Brave Bird did not feel that her voice was completely lost or that her stories had been substantively changed; she was proud of their books having been published and her stories shared with the world.

Brave Bird’s detractors might interpret her statement as a damning concession, but she does give her consent to the collaborative process with Erdoes here in the first bit of that sentence, and that affirmation, along with her pride in the book and her desire that it be read suggest that *Lakota Woman* and its sequel *Ohitika Woman* might be worthwhile after all, despite critics’ disapproval and copious vitriol. In *Writing Together/Writing Apart* (2002), Linda Karell meditates upon the collaboration between Mourning Dove and her white mentor in the novel *Cogewea* and remarks that collaborative narratives, though perhaps unable to meet the subjective standards set by readers in search of so-called authenticity, can still make a “valuable contribution to the ongoing conversations surrounding Native American and western American literatures” (91). Moreover, Brave Bird does claim authorial control over her books and refers to them as collaborative efforts; early in the first chapter of *Ohitika Woman*, she admits that “every week, I had to borrow money from Richard, my wasichu coauthor” and muses that “Because of some of the things I’d said in *Lakota Woman*, women on the res had liked my book” (3).

Although Brave Bird does not mention her hand in revising the books in her interview with Wise and Wise, Imelda Martín Junquera insists in “From *Black Elk Speaks* to *Lakota Woman*” (2005) that “Erdoes recorded the words and then took the printing proofs to Mary E. Crow Dog [Brave Bird] to be revised by her . . . she was literate enough to have corrected any misunderstandings
or additions that Erdoes could have included without her permission” (59). Junquera’s project, a lonely defense of Brave Bird in a sea of detractors, makes the thoughtful argument that the books are indeed worthwhile collaborations, and in her essay’s thesis statement, she announces that she will “contemplate Mary and Erdoes working hand in hand to produce the text” throughout her essay (60). With Brave Bird’s retention of authorial control in mind, I want to go in a slightly different direction than Junquera, building upon this notion that Brave Bird was not manipulated into producing texts that connote manifest manners, but rather texts that exemplify Vizenor’s notion of survivance.

**Brave Bird’s Texts as Narratives of Survivance and Resistance**

Now that we have explored the variety of complaints levied against Brave Bird and Erdoes, I want to consider what these books do accomplish in terms of Native activism. If we read Brave Bird’s books as narratives of survivance and resistance, her stories enact, as Vizenor puts it, “renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (vi). First, consider Brave Bird’s rejection of victimization in her response to contemporary Native issues and problems on the reservation near the end of the long “Bleeding Always Stops If You Press Down Hard Enough” chapter in *Ohitika Woman*. Nearly every sentence in this paragraph begins with the clause “I am sick and tired of,” and she begins her lengthy list of grievances with Christopher Columbus: “I am sick and tired of all the bullshit that has been dumped on us by the wasichu [white people] for more than five hundred years after we were ‘discovered’ by a fellow who was merely eight thousand miles off course and who thought he had landed in India” (207). After lobbing this bomb, Brave Bird forges on, wending her way through myriad problems—of which she is “sick and tired”—faced by Native populations, through domination by “an alien and hostile culture,” capitalism, poverty on reservations, alcoholism, suicide, imprisonment, land-grab efforts by state
and federal governments, labor exploitation, and institutionalized abduction of Lakota children
by state agencies and white couples (207). After she parses these various strands of settler
colonial oppression, Brave Bird closes this minefield of grievances on a hopeful note of
resistance: “After five hundred years of being held in subjection, we are finally standing up”
(208). While corralling these complaints into a lone, tidy paragraph might be Erdoes’s
handiwork, here we see Brave Bird not only refusing to be victimized, but taking pride in the
potentiality of Native resistance. In this crucial paragraph, Brave Bird and Erdoes challenge
Cook-Lynn’s gripe that the “seeds of continuing crises [in Native communities] . . . are given
little cause-and-effect analysis” in Lakota as-told-to books (Review 92). Indigenous sick-and-
tiredness, though surely draining past the point of exhaustion, has led to this inflection point.

Also, Brave Bird frequently calls out violence against Natives in her books, and by doing
so, she engages with South Dakota’s embedded structures of institutional and socialized racism
and thus works to subvert the dominant frontier narrative by demonstrating survivance. For
instance, in her description of Rapid City’s anti-Native sentiment that ruled its drinking
establishments in the mid-twentieth century, Brave Bird calls attention to the injustice and
senselessness undergirding such discrimination, and at the same time, she turns the tables and
suggests that whites were to blame: “The bars in Rapid City were known to be tough on Indians
. . . There was not one single Sioux from Rosebud, Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, Cheyenne River,
or Oak Creek who did not bear the scars of humiliations, undeserved arrests, or beatings received
in this town whose main sport has always been Indian-baiting” (Lakota Woman 117-18).
Although Brave Bird offers no solutions or overt suggestions of resistance in this passage, the
fact that she voices these concerns at all and offers an alternate point of view to the world is
important. Silencing, in this case, would support the dominant frontier trope of the vanishing
Indian. As Moore grimly notes, “America is built on the vanishing of Indians” (4). Lorenzo Veracini echoes Moore, explaining that “indigenous people routinely pierce the fantasy of a tabula rasa” and the political effect is that “indigenous people disrupt settler political orders by simply staying put” (41). In this case, we see indigenous people disrupting settler social order as well simply by daring to be in Rapid City, on the land promised to them in both (broken) Fort Laramie Treaties, and what is more, Brave Bird counters the frontier narrative of these white bargoers and brawlers by asserting the injustice of their racism while underscoring the humanity of Natives in this passage.

Brave Bird makes a similar move in Lakota Woman by speaking up about violence against and rape of Native women. In this powerful passage which seems to anticipate the twenty-first century’s Me Too Movement, Brave Bird finally tells her story of assault after keeping it to herself for decades: “I was forcefully raped when I was fourteen or fifteen . . . I kicked and scratched and bit but he came on me like a steamroller. Ripped my clothes apart, ripped me apart. I was too embarrassed and ashamed to tell anyone what had happened to me” (67-8). She follows this devastating, personal moment with one laden with social critique, pointing directly at white officers of the law in South Dakota this time: “A few years back the favorite sport of white state troopers and cops was to arrest young Indian girls on a drunk-and-disorderly, take them to the drunk tanks in their jails, and there rape them” (68). In both her personal account and her memory of the troopers’ and cops’ horrific pastime, Brave Bird renounces victimhood and insists upon survivance; manifest manners, meanwhile, would dictate that neither story be told.

Brave Bird’s frequent laments of her best friend Annie Mae Aquash, too, advocate survivance and participate in activism. With her numerous passages about Annie Mae, her AIM
member friend who was found dead on Pine Ridge in 1975, Brave Bird grieves publicly and ensures that readers will remember Annie Mae’s name. Annie Mae appears again and again in both books, a trend which begins in the fourth paragraph of *Lakota Woman*’s first chapter. Here Brave Bird recounts the mysterious circumstances surrounding Annie Mae’s death, and her body’s brutal treatment by the FBI:

> My best friend was Annie Mae Aquash, a young, strong-hearted woman from the Micmac Tribe with beautiful children . . . Annie Mae was found dead in the snow at the bottom of a ravine on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The police said that she had died of exposure, but there was a .38 caliber slug in her head. The FBI cut off her hands and sent them to Washington for fingerprint identification, hands that had helped my baby come into this world. (*Lakota Woman* 4).

From this point on, Brave Bird relentlessly includes Annie Mae in her storytelling throughout *Lakota Woman* (and in her memories of the AIM days in *Ohikita Woman*), and Brave Bird and Erdoes devote *Lakota Woman*’s thirteenth chapter, “Two Cut-off Hands” to Annie Mae.

Nearly every time she mentions Annie Mae in the books, Brave Bird mourns, closing, for instance, Annie Mae’s chapter with the lines, “Someday I am going to find out who killed this good, gently tough, gifted friend of mine who did not deserve to die. Someday I will tell her daughters that she died for them, died like a warrior. Someday I will see Annie Mae. In a strange way I feel that she died so that I, and many others, could survive” (198). Brave Bird’s constant circling back to Annie Mae, as well as her philosophizing and elegizing, indicate that Annie Mae is a grievable person, despite the State of South Dakota’s vigorous attempts at dehumanizing her. As Brave Bird remembers, South Dakota’s then-attorney general and soon-to-be governor William Janklow had publicly claimed that “the only way to deal with renegade AIM Indians
was to put a bullet through their heads, and someone had taken the hint” (198). South Dakota’s official position, then, was that Natives, particularly “AIM Indians,” and especially Annie Mae Aquash, were not grievable, to invoke Judith Butler once again, in the least. If the Indians would not vanish as our frontier mythology claims that they have, the subtext of Janklow’s statement of manifest manners implies, South Dakota just needs to keep trying. Brave Bird’s memories of Annie Mae Aquash, as we can see by her frequent laments, insist that not only is she grievable and will never be forgotten by Brave Bird herself, but that the reader remember her name as well.

Brave Bird’s published act of mourning anticipates still another twenty-first century social justice movement: the enormous number Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in the United States, particularly the Northern Plains. Brave Bird’s persistent melancholia and repetition of Annie Mae’s name throughout her books suggest a less overt but still powerful iteration of activism that Cook-Lynn seems to disregard in Brave Bird’s books. According to Butler:

- Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. (22)

Brave Bird’s haunting repetitions of her best friend Annie Mae Aquash’s name throughout her books thus becomes a radical act. I concede that Annie Mae has been memorialized in other works by Native writers, most notably Joy Harjo’s spoken word piece “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash (1997), but Brave Bird’s close friendship with Annie Mae and her seemingly bottomless stash of poignant stories about her illustrate the deep “relational ties” and “dependency” which
Butler suggests can foster “political community.” While Harjo’s beautiful poem elegizes Annie Mae and the circumstances surrounding her murder in broader terms, as we see in her lines “You are the shimmering young woman / Who found her voice, / When you were warned to be silent, or have your body cut away / From you like an elegant weed,” Brave Bird memorializes her friend much more intimately, telling very personal and detailed stories and anecdotes, including quotidian and sometimes humorous details that could nearly make readers feel as if we knew Aquash personally (Harjo). Brave Bird’s and Erdoes’s Annie Mae is very much alive, powerful and ebullient throughout most of *Lakota Woman*: “She never walked into my home, she always burst in, full of energy” and “She stayed on and off with us at Crow Dog’s Paradise. She got very high up in the councils of AIM, to the extent of helping set movement policies. She had no luck with men” (186, 190-91). Representationally, then, her death becomes all the more searing when her body is found. Brave Bird grieves, and readers, after getting to know Annie Mae so well by proxy, likely do as well.

Moreover, Brave Bird’s approach to memorializing her murdered friend was ahead of its time; sadly, the need to remember and say the names of MMIW has only recently been recognized as necessary. In a South Dakota Public Broadcasting article entitled “To Say Their Names” (2019), Nikkole Bostnar, a student at Oglala Lakota College in Rapid City and a co-founder of the MMIW He Sapa [Black Hills] organization, explains, “The issue of MMIW has been happening over centuries ever since the colonizers came to this country. All the way back to the boarding schools, it’s always been swept under the rug” (“To Say”). On the Northern Plains, for well over a century, cases of missing and murdered Native women were rarely perceived as worthy of news reporting or investigation by the authorities, Annie Mae included. Brave Bird’s frequent inclusions of her reject the dominant paradigm of settler colonial silencing.
Furthermore, Mary Brave Bird’s books, which I suggest we consider as collaborative narratives of survivance and resistance, function in complex ways as activist texts with implications stretching far beyond her participation in the American Indian Movement. I have already underscored the sociopolitical importance of a few of her thematic concerns: racism, violence, rape, and mourning, all of which renounce the “dominance, tragedy, and victimry” Vizenor outlines in his explanation of survivance, in my attempt to show that Brave Bird’s books shouldn’t be dismissed since they address key issues and perform more cultural heavy lifting than mere cookie-cutter hagiographies might (vi). For the remainder of this chapter, I offer an even deeper reading of Brave Bird’s books, weaving Vizenor’s notion of survivance into three of the five “alternative reading strategies” Romero offers in *Activism and the American Novel*, her brilliant, progressive study of fiction by women of color after the 1980s (31). Romero’s alternative reading strategies, I contend, don’t apply singularly to fiction; they can help us think about Brave Bird’s collaborative (auto)biographies in new and interesting ways. As Romero explains recent literary offerings by women of color are “not only trying to broaden our notions of identity” but “also trying to address a much more traumatic gap between the promise of democracy and the lived reality of oppression,” which aligns with Brave Bird’s project (7-8). Three of Romero’s reading strategies, orality, spiritual ontology, and discursive characterization, though intended for reading contemporary fiction, offer particularly useful lenses for reconsidering Brave Bird’s nonfiction.

In the context of the as-told-to dilemma, I first want to consider Romero’s orality as a reading strategy, since Brave Bird and Erdoes’s recording and writing process, though under fire by Cook-Lynn and others, could be considered a contemporary—and not necessarily bastardized—twist on the oral tradition. According to Simon Ortiz, Native American oral
traditions historically include “prayer, song, drama-ritual, narrative or story-telling, much of it within ceremony—some of it outside of ceremony—which is religious and social. Indeed, through the past five centuries the oral tradition has been the most reliable method by which Indian culture and community integrity have been maintained” (9). The stories were and are dynamic, with each storyteller telling their stories in their own way, adapting their stories to time and place, and passing on knowledge to others, especially future generations. Brave Bird’s oral narratives, though frozen in time by Erdoes and the written word, ensure that her stories, her memories of Annie Mae Aquash and Wounded Knee II, and the effects of settler colonialism will be remembered. Her recounting of boarding school, her sister’s forced sterilization, beatings, rape, racism, alcohol abuse, and living conditions on Rosebud and Pine Ridge, to name a few of the issues she addresses, paint a troubling picture of life for the Lakota people in the mid- and later twentieth century, and serves as a valuable literary artifact, a sobering reminder of the settler colonial project in South Dakota.

And for those skeptics who might object to Brave Bird’s inclusion in the oral tradition, I want to examine Erdoes’s role in the production of these books and the firm degree of control over the narrative that Brave Bird maintained. In her study of fiction by women of color, Romero points out that one of Toni Morrison’s aims in her fiction is, as Morrison puts it, “to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken” (Romero 32). In Brave Bird’s texts, particularly in Ohitika Woman, we can discern qualities of orality, untampered with by Erdoes. One of the ways Ohitika Woman retains orality has to do with Brave Bird’s very approachable, decidedly 1970s casual speech, as we see in her description of the disappearance of Roque Duanes, an associate of Leonard Peltier.12 Brave Bird remembers “when some brothers got suspicious and went through his billfold and found a list of the serial numbers of guns, word
went out that Roque was working for the Man, that he was an informer” (46). This sort of casual speech crops up frequently throughout the text, suggesting that Erdoes did not tamper with her voice as much as she insinuates in her interview with Wise and Wise when she recounts her first response to Erdoes’s draft: “Gee whiz, I don’t talk like this” (Wise and Wise). Yet Erdoes did not even correct Brave Bird’s grammatical mistakes, as we see in the moment when she gives birth to her second son Ahwah in a Washington D.C. hospital: “It was the first time I had been among black people and they treated me really good, like a family member” (55). Erdoes could easily have replaced “really good” with “really well” but did not. Moreover, Brave Bird’s casual speech even affects the book’s temporal positioning occasionally, as we see in her recollection of her car crash and recovery from it: “My friend Debbie, who I had the talk with after I wrecked, had a son about thirteen years old who died in a wreck. There’s a lot of tragedies like that. This year a lot of young people died in wrecks. There’s usually alcohol or drugs involved” (269, my emphasis). This passage, too, retains elements of orality since she doesn’t specify which year, and it reads as if she is right there, telling the story and situating it in the present day for context and as a warning.

And while Lakota Woman’s chapters are neatly organized and the storytelling is mostly chronological, its sequel Ohitika Woman occasionally meanders, backtracks, and circles around, which further evokes an oral quality. For example, the chapter “A Little Backtracking” opens with the line “I have to backtrack a little bit” and then launches into a very compressed, five-page-long version of the standoff at Wounded Knee (24). This chapter gives new readers context and Lakota Woman readers a brief review of her having given birth during the 1973 siege at Wounded Knee and how she came to marry Leonard Crow Dog, AIM’s medicine man, after their time at “the Knee” ended. This chapter, though out of chronological order, has the “oral,
meandering, effortless, [and] spoken” qualities Morrison valorizes. And in a more blatant example of orality, Brave Bird’s narrative meanders a bit at the end of the “Skin Art” chapter on tattooing in Ohitika Woman: “He [her second husband Rudi] has been working for over a year on my brother-in-law’s stomach . . . It’s a very ambitious project—eagles, and tipis, and Sitting Bull, and whatnot. I wonder if he’ll ever finish it, call it part of an Indian, Chicano-biker-prison tradition. Well, this was just a little wandering off the track of my story” (264). While this swerve is unique to this otherwise-focused if nonlinear text, this passage, too, exemplifies the qualities outlined by Morrison and illustrates (at least fleetingly) the dynamic nature of oral storytelling, although her digression is frozen on the page for all time.

Now that I have situated Brave Bird at least on the periphery of the oral tradition, it follows that Romero’s theorization of orality as a reading strategy would offer a fresh way to read Brave Bird, particularly as a means to approach her occasional, scathing asides about South Dakota in Lakota Woman. Romero values but does not limit orality to the qualities suggested by Morrison; Romero presses further and asserts that Morrison and others put the onus on readers of fiction to learn more about the issues plaguing their respective characters. As Romero explains, “By giving their readers knowledge of social problems, yet refusing to offer specific remedies, Morrison and other contemporary writers of color encourage and empower their readers to produce political knowledge” (32). Morrison echoes this sentiment, opining that in her fiction she attempts to “have something in it that enlightens, something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (32). Although Brave Bird’s books are nonfiction, Romero’s observation offers a very different way to interpret Lakota Woman and its sequel, considering Cook-Lynn’s complaint that the Native
“hagiography” genre offers no solutions, as “the seeds of continuing crises in our Indian communities, while laid bare and exposed, are given little cause-and effect analysis” and so “no problem-solving model will emerge from these fields of inquiry” (Review 92). Perhaps encouraging and empowering the reader to think about the enormous tangle of settler colonial relationships and issues in South Dakota is closer to Brave Bird’s point.

Take, for instance, Brave Bird’s multitude of withering statements about South Dakota. Throughout *Lakota Woman*, she occasionally zooms out from personal narrative to deliver biting observations about the state and its white inhabitants, and it is true that she offers no immediate solutions to these enormous issues she raises. Her claims sometimes lead into a story but often follow her very detailed stories as a bitter summation. For instance, in the chapter “Invisible Fathers, she introduces a brief, childhood tale of injustice with the bold, blanket assertion that “In South Dakota, white kids learn to be racists almost before they learn to walk” and then she launches into the paragraph-long story itself in the next sentence, informing the reader that “When I was about seven or eight years old, I fought with the school principal’s daughter” and continuing on from there (22). Brave Bird thus supports her claim about South Dakota with this anecdotal evidence, but she offers no solution to this complicated problem of socialization and systemic racism. I concede that a tidy and satisfactory solution to these very complex issues is an elusive proposition, but her not offering one, though precisely one of Cook-Lynn’s primary complaints in her skewering of Lakota “hagiographies,” works in a way Cook-Lynn does not anticipate: Brave Bird places the onus upon the reader to actively question these paradigms. In that way, Brave Bird’s litany of observations about South Dakota asks the reader to engage with the legacy of settler colonialism. Moreover, engaging the reader in that way via this reading strategy honors the reader’s agency, which Cook-Lynn also does not take into account with her
withering, highly subjective assertion that “The meticulous, heart rending examination of Indian failure by writers who may or may not know they are from the world of colonial masters is depressing and distasteful” (Review 92).

To further exemplify Brave Bird’s encouragement of readers’ agency—and to refute that such solution-less moments are indeed merely “depressing and distasteful,” I want to point to another powerful passage a few pages later, in the same chapter: the close of Brave Bird’s remembrances of her Aunt Elsie Flood. As Brave Bird explains, her auntie was found dead, beaten to a pulp, and as Brave Bird puts it: “Her death has never been investigated. The life of an Indian is not held in great value in the State of South Dakota. There is no woman like her anymore” (25, my emphasis). Brave Bird then pivots to a more general discussion of how her friends and relatives who meant the most to her have been killed or died inexplicable deaths, and she offers no solutions about what could be done about the State of South Dakota’s anti-Native sentiment. In both cases, I contend, her solution-less South Dakota statements, “encourage and empower their readers to produce political knowledge,” as Romero says oral (and written approximations of oral) storytelling should do (32). Readers might ask how South Dakota came to be this way, which treaties were broken and which pieces of legislation encouraged this paradigm, why this anti-Native sentiment persists in social, cultural, and political realms, what the current state of affairs is, and what can be done about it, to name a few possible avenues of reconciliation and reparation. In a settler colonial structure, as Lorenzo Veracini notes, decolonization becomes very difficult, if not completely impossible, and he does not think that forcing settlers’ descendants to move is a viable solution. Instead, he muses, “if conquest and movement make settlers, decolonization should lie in undoing conquest, not in the production of further displacement” (103). Brave Bird’s claims about South Dakota calls on her readers to ask
difficult questions in historical as well as contemporary contexts, and seek solutions to the myriad problems with this settler state and go about the arduous task of “undoing conquest.”

Furthermore, in terms of survivance, while these statements do show the “victimry, dominance, and tragedy” that Vizenor would denounce as narratives of manifest manners, I want to point out that Brave Bird voices these concerns publicly, refusing to be silenced, and so we might consider these grim statements about South Dakota as assertions of survivance instead. I gesture again to David Moore’s astute observation that “When Native writers publish, they pose the fundamental question of what would change if America were to accept the fact that Indians never vanished and never will” (20). Although Brave Bird relied on Erdoes to write her books, she did voice those concerns and according to Junquera, approve Erdoes’s drafts, and the very act of publishing these books, therefore, demonstrate survivance and suggest sovereignty as well.

Yet another of Romero’s reading strategies for fiction, spiritual ontology, helps readers think about Brave Bird’s books in the context of survivance by demystifying Lakota spiritual beliefs, as well as those of the Native American Church, while simultaneously rejecting their exoticization and appropriation. Romero, in her reading of Ana Castillo’s So Far From God (1993), explains that spiritual ontology as a reading practice challenges monolithic, Anglocentric belief structures in contemporary fiction:

Because the beliefs represented in fiction by contemporary women of color are grounded in culturally and historically locatable communities, their readers are able materially to connect the world within the text to the world without. These texts’ representations legitimize sacred traditions and communities that have been discredited by the dominant discourse; thus, they introduce and reinforce the possibility of alternative ways of being in the world. (38)
In the case of Brave Bird’s nonfiction, her books explain several ceremonies and practices, such as the sweat lodge, the yuwipi (doctoring) ceremony, crying for a vision, and the sun dance. She emphasizes their importance and sacredness, which is an important gesture for her white readers who might perceive Lakota religion as primitive and savage, but also for the exploitative, appropriative New Age crowd. Brave Bird takes care to not to give too much away to her non-Native readers; she notes in *Ohitika Woman* that she does “agree with our elders that there are some things one should never talk about with outsiders” (101). New Age-y readers in search of instruction and white, Rainbow Family-esque hippies hoping for a Lakota-style vision will be disappointed in Brave Bird’s books, which are bereft of shamanic pointers.

Furthermore, Brave Bird’s narratives about ceremonies, as well as her frank and frequent mentions of sacred herbs, undercut the notion of magical Native Americans, a standard trope in Western American literature and film. These representations, of course, have little to do with actual Native spiritual and cultural practices and function instead as a simulation of manifest manners. Brave Bird rejects this repeated gesture in the “literature of dominance” by underscoring the importance of ceremony to her during her major events in her life—she did marry AIM’s medicine man, Leonard Crow Dog, after the 1973 siege—and perhaps more importantly, in her quotidian life (Vizenor 29). She begins the “Ceremonies” chapter in *Ohitika Woman* by highlighting the ubiquity and ordinariness of ceremonies in Lakota life:

> I want to talk further of the meaning our ancient beliefs have in our daily life, not as a medicine person, which I am not, but simply as a tribal woman . . . I don’t want to give away any secrets because I do not have secrets of the sort that whites expect to get from Native Americans, secrets to “give them power,” or to “enable them to have an
extrasensory experience.” I am talking of basic concepts, of everyday living. (101, my emphases).

She goes on to explain the uses of various herbs, the pipe, wasna (pemmican), and the drum, and also discusses sweat lodges, and yuwipi doctoring in the “Ceremonies” chapter, following it with another chapter titled “The Granddaddy of Them All,” devoted solely to the sun dance ceremony. These chapters demystify and reify these practices for her outsider readers and serve as a corrective for those with pop culture-derived misperceptions or faulty notions of savagery carried over by lingering Manifest Destiny ideologies.

For example, Brave Bird’s very detailed descriptions of yuwipi preparation helps to demystify this ceremony for non-Native readers. She describes preparing for a yuwipi with the utmost care, while dispelling any New Age-y magical-ness of it and instead emphasizing Lakota spirituality. According to Brave Bird, “For whites, the most awesome of our ceremonies is the yuwipi. It is a finding-out ritual—finding a missing person, or object, or the cause of a sickness” (104). To non-Lakota people, the yuwipi might seem magical and flashy, but belief, care, and respect, she asserts, are paramount. And preparing for this ceremony demands the utmost seriousness; the yuwipi requires a very specific setup before it can be performed, as she explains:

For the yuwipi you need chanli—tobacco ties, tiny tobacco bundles tied into a long string that represent offerings and prayers. There are 405 tobacco ties, and they are laid out in a square. There is an altar with its red and white staff to which an eagle feather and a deer tail are tied. There are the staff with the eagle head, and the four direction flags at the corners of the square. And there is the sacred food. (104)

This prescribed number of tobacco ties and their placement illustrate the great care that the ceremony participants must take in their preparations. This is no slapdash enactment of savage
rituals imagined by the non-Native public but rather a very important piece of Lakota spirituality. Furthermore, Brave Bird’s matter-of-factness about the spirits’ appearance during the yuwipi further dispel any preconceptions of magic the non-Native reader might hold. She explains, “When the fourth song is sung the spirits enter the square. They’ll make a loud noise. The rattles will start shaking. Sometimes you hear an eagle in there. Sometimes you hear little voices from the gourds, and there are lights coming from the gourds, sparks that travel around the altar real fast, at lightning speed, and it’s all in rhythm with the drum” (105-6). Her explanation that the spirits’ entrance occurs when the fourth song is sung suggests that it has been and is always this way. Their entrance is not random but anticipated. Yet each yuwipi is unique; her two statements that begin with “sometimes” attest to that fact, but at the same time, she makes it clear that these variances are known—and also expected.

As an active participant in the Native American Church, Brave Bird also demystifies the use of peyote and imbues it with reverence and seriousness in Ohitika Woman, while smashing any outsider readers’ misconceptions that Natives take peyote to simply get high. While the ingestion of peyote is not traditionally a ceremonial Lakota practice, Brave Bird and her former husband Leonard incorporated Native American Church practices into their traditional Lakota ceremonies and treated peyote as a sacrament. As Stephen E. Feraca explains in Wakinyan: Lakota Religion in the Twentieth Century (1998), the Native American Church resembled the Ghost Dance in its fairly rapid spread throughout the Great Plains. Like the Ghost Dance it was the bane of federal officials, Christian missionaries and schoolteachers, and, like the earlier Ghost Dance religious fervor, it also flourished in the face of continued attack from those who were determined to dictate their own religious beliefs to the Indian people. (59)
In the context of Romero’s spiritual ontology as a reading strategy, by treating peyote ingestion as a normative practice in her books, Brave Bird pushes back against narcissistic settler colonial notions of savagery and the misperceptions of culturally appropriative outsiders who misconstrue the purposes of taking peyote. As she puts it in *Lakota Woman*, “Peyote came to the Plains Indians just when they needed it most, at a time when the last of the buffalo were being killed and the tribes driven into fenced-in reservations, literally starving and dying of the white man’s diseases, deprived of everything that had given meaning to their lives” (99). Brave Bird conflates ingesting peyote to taking refuge in this passage and she defends it as a legitimate response to settler colonial invasion. She goes on to issue a warning to settler-descended, culturally appropriative hippies, New Age enthusiasts, Native culture fetishists from Europe, and other peyote-curious, non-Native groups in this passage, in case they somehow missed the seriousness of her earlier statement regarding peyote’s arrival on the Plains and its importance: “It is so good, and yet it can be dangerous if a person misuses it. You have to be in the right mind, approach it the right way. If people have the wrong thoughts about it, it could hurt them” (100). Here Brave Bird legitimizes the Native American Church members’ use of the sacred herb for her readers via her inference that they take peyote with great reverence, and she underscores the gravity of this practice; the Church members don’t take it simply for the sake of intoxication.

I want to gesture toward a third and final reading strategy of Romero’s that can help us think about Brave Bird’s nonfiction books in productive ways in terms of survivance and settler colonialism: her notion of discursive characterization. In fiction, classical realism in the American canon has lauded the individual and his exhibition of the traits Nina Baym refers to collectively as Americanness: a white male taming a wilderness and transforming himself in the
process seems to be the general formula. But contemporary fiction by women of color, as
Romero puts it,

alerts us to the need to reconceive our concept of characterization by refusing the focus
on the private individual that characterizes the traditional novel. Instead of an individual
protagonist, novels by contemporary women of color often focus on communities . . .
[which in turn] highlights how individuals and communities are affected and transformed
by larger discourses, such as race, class, gender, and nation. (34-5)

Discursive characterization is useful in our consideration of Brave Bird’s nonfiction as well,
particularly in the context of Brave Bird’s reframing notions of community, particularly AIM.
Early in *Lakota Woman*, Brave Bird explains to her readers the concept of the *tiospaye*, or
traditional Lakota hunting clan or extended family.13 Although she doesn’t name it, she points to
the Dawes Act of 1887 as the United States government’s way of breaking up the tiospaye; this
Act divided reservation land into allotments and forced Natives into nuclear families rather than
traditional, extended families. Brave Bird explains, “The whites destroyed the tiospaye, not
accidentally, but as a matter of policy. The close-knit clan, set in its old ways, was a stumbling
block in the path of the missionary and government agent, its traditions and customs a barrier to
what the white man called ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’” (13). The disintegration of the tiospaye
is yet another tragedy wrought by the federal government’s systemic and slow violence aimed at
Native Americans in general and the Lakota in particular.

But in the early 1970s, Lakotas wanting to take action found another sort of community
by joining forces with Dakota and Ojibwa activists in the American Indian Movement, and
Brave Bird’s storytelling in the middle section of *Lakota Woman* shifts primarily to using first
person plural pronouns, ostensibly to suggest that at long last, Brave Bird has found a
community of kindred souls. The chapters “We AIM Not to Please” and “The Siege” are positively riddled with usages of “we,” with the exception of her very personal memories of giving birth to her son Pedro at Wounded Knee in 1973. Brave Bird’s newfound sense of community culminates not in the siege itself, but in her response to Black Elk in her later chapter “The Ghosts Return.” At the close of Black Elk Speaks, Black Elk despairs, “And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead” (Neihardt 270). The sacred hoop has multiple meanings, according to Black Elk and Neihardt scholars, but most of them agree that the sacred hoop symbolizes the community of the Lakota nation, as Black Elk suggests during his recounting of his great vision. A “great Voice” tells him to “Behold the circle of the nation’s hoop, for it is holy, being endless, and thus all powers shall be one power in the people without end” (Neihardt 35). The breaking of the hoop, then, represents the grim realities of settler colonialism in terms of the Lakota people facing genocide: the forced removal to reservations, the broken Fort Laramie Treaties, the loss of the sacred Black Hills, the Wounded Knee Massacre, and on and on—and on.

But Brave Bird, after recounting stories of the Ghost Dance coming to the Lakota and the subsequent Wounded Knee massacre of 1890 in her “The Ghosts Return” chapter of Lakota Woman, responds by triumphantly correcting Black Elk, who did not anticipate the rise of AIM: “In that ravine, at Cankpe Opi, we gathered up the pieces of the sacred hoop and put them together again. All who were at Wounded Knee, Buddy Lamont, Clearwater, and our medicine men, we mended the nation’s hoop. The sacred tree is not dead!” (155). In this moment, Brave Bird’s sense of community stretches beyond her fellow AIM members to all Lakota, Dakota, and
Nakota people, and she repudiates the popular misconception of the vanishing Indian in the American cultural imaginary by asserting not only sovereignty, but healing.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the controversy surrounding Mary Brave Bird’s as-told-to books *Lakota Woman* and *Ohitika Woman* and have attempted to situate these collaborative works into the rich genre of Lakota activist literature. As we have seen, Brave Bird herself had no qualms about working with Erdoes; although he tinkered with her phrasing a little, she felt it far more important that her stories of boarding school, the American Indian Movement, her missing and murdered friends, traditional ceremonies that have endured despite the best efforts of the American settler colonial government, and her life on the Rosebud Reservation be told—and as she insisted to Wise and Wise, *read*. Brave Bird’s stories, though they may be mediated to some degree through Richard Erdoes, serve as crucial artifacts of conditions in the American settler state in the twentieth century, and they invite both Native and non-Native readers to think about the durable structures of settler colonialism and perhaps reimagine a more peaceful future free of oppression and brutality. Though Bernadin seems to suggest that Brave Bird and Erdoes pander to white readers in her acknowledgement of as-told-to books’ “continued market appeal” in “The Authenticity Game,” she also notes that “The ‘all-American’ genre of autobiography has furnished Native writers both past and present with a powerful form of testimonial and resistance literature” (157). Brave Bird’s two texts, as I have shown, function exactly in that way, though Western American readers and critics with un-meetable criteria for authenticity might remain disappointed with these books. Yet just as we do not dismiss Mary Prince and other early Transatlantic storytellers for their mediated accounts of chattel slavery, the Lakota as-told-to genre, too, has inherent value and should not be waved away so easily. Insisting upon
authenticity as a mode of judging texts remains a fraught and faulty practice; as Moore reminds us, “When critics address authenticity, they might do so most productively in ways that question that question” (238).

In his 1979 introduction to Black Elk Speaks for the University of Nebraska press editions, Vine Deloria, Jr. acknowledges and forgives the book’s authorship problems on the grounds of its being one of the world’s “great religious teachings”:

So let it be with Black Elk Speaks. That it speaks to us with simple and compelling language about an aspect of human experience and encourages us to emphasize the best that dwells within us is sufficient. Black Elk and John Neihardt would probably nod affirmatively to that statement and continue their conversation. It is good. It is enough” (xiv).

Though Lakota Woman and Ohitika Woman do very different work than Black Elk Speaks in terms of religion and resistance, it is my contention that we should abandon charges of inauthenticity as a critical criterion against Mary Brave Bird and Richard Erdoes for putting these valuable works of Lakota resistance literature into the world. Though the debate over their authenticity may rage on regardless, Brave Bird’s desire that they be read, at least, will be fulfilled.
Endnotes

1 Brave Bird’s texts grace numerous grocery store and tourist trap book racks in western South Dakota, particularly the Black Hills, and the books even inspired a film, 1994’s *Lakota Woman: Siege at Wounded Knee*. Yet with the exception of a handful of critical offerings that deride her collaborations with Erdoes, her books have not received much critical attention. *Black Elk Speaks*, on the other hand, has inspired several monographs and countless critical essays.

2 Blood quantum is a fraction of Native ancestry required by some tribes for membership. This exclusivist, controversial criterion is driven by racism and “tedious bureaucracies,” as Gerald Vizenor puts it. He explains, “Government attention has turned from the blood quantum of each tribal person recorded on a reservation to natural resources, casinos, and reservation economies; even so, the notion of an arithmetic reduction of blood as a historical document is no less detestable and detrimental to mental health” (101).

3 As the book title suggests, Banks was Ojibwa and not Lakota. Banks co-founded AIM in Minneapolis in 1968 originally to protect Natives from police brutality. Banks was present at the most notorious AIM actions in South Dakota, including the 1971 occupation of Mt. Rushmore, the attempted 1973 takeover of the courthouse in Custer following the murder of Wesley Bad Heart Bull, and the 71-day Wounded Knee occupation just two weeks following the riot in Custer.

4 Pratt’s notorious boarding school philosophy, as I discuss in more detail in my chapter on Dan O’Brien’s fiction, “God Forbid That They Should Perish,” was to “kill the Indian and save the man” (White 113). Zitkala-Ša, needless to say, vehemently disagreed with Pratt’s pedagogy and instead espoused preservation and practice of Native traditions.

5 Hafen’s recently-published, extensive collection of Zitkala-Ša’s work includes documents that, according to her introduction, “have been available in varied sources, some accessible and some requiring major archival research” and that “This is the first collection to include speeches, articles, editorials, and congressional testimonies” (Hafen *Help*, introduction). While most of the pieces in Hafen’s collection exemplify Zitkala-Ša’s activism through literature and language, a few particularly notable essays are “Americanize the First Americans,” and “A Protest Against the Abolition of the Indian Dance,” as well as her Congressional reports “Oil and Gas Leases on American Indian Reservations,” and “Survey of Conditions of Indians in [the] United States.”

6 *Dakota Grammar* was a collaboration between Ella Deloria and Franz Boas, and Boas’s name is listed as the first author in the 1976 reprint by the National Academy of Sciences. I have been unable to locate a first edition thus far, but we can probably assume that Boas is listed first and Deloria second for that version as well.

7 See Ostler, pp. 113-14.
Though I do not include him here for want of room, the activist-academic lineage of the brilliant Deloria family continues with Vine Jr.’s son Philip J. Deloria, professor of history at Harvard and author of *Playing Indian*, a foundational text in Native Studies.

Vine Deloria, Jr. maintained an athletic skepticism of anthropologists—with the exception of his Auntie Ella, of course—and devoted his fourth chapter, “Anthropologists and Other Friends” of *Custer* to a very humorous skewering of them.

In the 1940s and after a series of major floods, Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build several dams along the Missouri River, including the Oahe Dam near Pierre. The Pick-Sloan plan was a compromise between the Corps and the Bureau of Reclamation. The dams proved to be catastrophic for the tribes, flooding out key grazing and agricultural lands, hunting and gathering areas, precious resources such as timber, ancestral burial grounds, and much more. Estes laments that “The Pick-Sloan Dams were a twentieth-century Indigenous apocalypse” and that “dispossession through eminent domain came in the form of floods and dams” (Estes, ch. 4).

*Mni Wiconi* is Lakota for “water is life.” The phrase was a key tenet of #NoDAPL and a favorite chant of the water protectors at Standing Rock.

AIM member Leonard Peltier is the United States’ longest-held political prisoner. Though he was not present at the 1973 Wounded Knee occupation, he went to Pine Ridge two years later to attempt to keep the peace since tensions still roiled between the Oglala Lakota people and the federal government. Two FBI agents were shot and killed while investigating an assault and robbery of a local ranch hand, and Peltier, though innocent, was framed. As Brave Bird explains in *Lakota Woman*, “Somebody had to be tried and convicted for their death—somebody, anybody. The FBI combed Pine Ridge for likely suspects but did not come up with anything . . . In the end they picked upon Leonard Peltier” (221). Peltier is still incarcerated as of fall 2021, and is not eligible for parole until 2035. “Free Leonard” has become a rallying cry for Native justice, and countless activists have called for his release, including Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. Peltier’s own collaborative book, *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance*, was published in 2016.

The concept of a *tiospaye* is grounded in the Lakota belief that all living beings are related to each other, captured in the phrase *Mitakuye Oyasin*. Brave Bird and Erdoes close *Ohitika Woman* with the words “MITAKUYE OYASIN—ALL MY RELATIONS” in all caps for emphasis.

While a handful of early Black British authors, including Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, were literate in English, many others were not and thus they produced collaborative texts, most notably Mary Prince, John Jea, and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw. While Ottobah Cugoano was literate, his skills were “rough,” according to Alan Richardson and Debbie Lee, and his work, too, may possibly be collaborative; while Richardson and Lee aren’t entirely sure, they do note that he may have received help only from Equiano (79). While I have followed the lead of other American critics and taken up the phrase “as-told-to” as a descriptor for this genre of Lakota texts, the perhaps more elegant phrase “as related by” in the titles of many of these Transatlantic works subtly hints that many of these works are mediated, as we see in
Gronniosaw’s title *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*, and Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince, a West-Indian Slave: Related by Herself*. But unlike the mediated texts by Brave Bird and other collaborative Lakota authors, these writers’ collaborative works are highly respected and greatly valued as literary and historical artifacts. Please see Alan Richardson and Debbie Lee’s excellent collection *Early Black British Writing: Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, and Others* (2004) for further reading.
Chapter Four

Undoing Settler Ecologies:

A Survey of South Dakota Nature Writing

In this chapter, I address four South Dakotan nature writers and interrogate how their textual representations of the landscape and its nonhuman inhabitants enact, reinscribe, and destabilize not only sociopolitical settler colonialism but also the ecological conquest which resulted from Western expansionism and continues to wreak havoc upon the fragile ecosystems of the Northern Plains. This chapter, with my survey of those four authors, is admittedly more crowded than my singular treatments of Oscar Micheaux, Dan O’Brien, and Mary Brave Bird, and my rationale for this organizational strategy is twofold: first, South Dakota’s ecosystems have historically been compromised since white settlers began their homesteading and mining efforts in the nineteenth century, and the various forms of damaging practices continue to this day; I therefore wanted to include a range of voices to represent and respond to these modes of environmental degradation. Second, the nature writing offerings in South Dakota literature are more numerous and varied than the unique, arrivant colonial works by Micheaux, or a significant oeuvre with problematic early work that flowers into more promising allyship with Native peoples, as we saw in O’Brien’s fiction. As I do with O’Brien’s novels, I trace a progression in this chapter, and in this case, I first examine the problematic literary tradition of enacting and valorizing settler and ecological colonialism representationally in the works of Badger Clark and then Linda Hasselstrom, who eagerly carries on Clark’s tradition of settler poetics. I then analyze Courtney Huse Wika’s nature poems and her decisive break with that tradition of ecological conquest in South Dakota poetry, and I close by returning to Dan O’Brien and a consideration of his two bison ranching memoirs in the context of his grasslands restoration project and its
implications of settler decoloniality. Through the works of these four authors, I sketch a continuum of ecological and settler colonial awareness, and I argue that while the works of Badger Clark and Linda Hasselstrom help to maintain the dominant, settler colonial narrative in South Dakota, Courtney Huse Wika and Dan O’Brien demonstrate productive ways to decolonize its landscapes, flora, and fauna.

In my effort to connect these writers’ representations of nature to settler colonialism, I frequently draw upon Deep Ecology’s distinction between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. This foundational approach suits my selected authors well, I feel, not only because it allows a way to get at settler ideologies, but also since none of these authors traffic in speculative cli-fi or dramatic, ecocatastrophic poetry. My aims are not to completely condemn Badger Clark or Linda Hasselstrom, nor to make an evaluative argument that simply posits anthropocentrism or settler colonialism as bad. Instead, I strive to open a long-overdue conversation about settler ecologies in South Dakota literature, one which I hope other critics will contribute to in the future, without insisting that my reading of these writers is the only way to interpret them. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick puts it in “Generous Argument” (2020), her meditation upon academic argumentation in our hyper-polarized, post-Trump world:

I’m not asking us not to disagree, not to push new ideas forward, not to think critically. I am, however, hoping that we might find ways to remember the deep understanding and even generosity that are critical thinking’s prerequisites—and perhaps most important, that we might find ways to help the world around us remember, too. This might begin with approaching one another’s work a little less prepared to disagree, a little less ready to demonstrate the greater value of our own perspective, instead turning our focus to the ideas we have for sustaining a dialogue, for building a community, and for creating the
conditions of possibility for a culture that can survive the political, economic, and environmental depredations it currently faces. (959)

South Dakota nature writing, with Badger Clark’s celebrated cowboy poetry as its status quo, deserves innumerable analyses and conversations which do not currently exist, and since settler colonialism is so deeply ingrained, posing a simple, evaluative argument could potentially serve as a deterrent to many prospective, future interlocutors.

Moreover, settler colonialism is, in fact, deeply connected to anthropocentrism, which has historically been reflected in American nature writing. Joshua DiCaglio offers cogent, updated definitions of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in his own effort to rescue the concepts in his essay “Ironic Ecology” (2015):

In the language of environmental discourse, the focus on conceptual ecological displacement is captured by the terms “anthropocentrism” and “ecocentrism.” To be anthropocentric is to hold the human as the center of our conceptual space, to see humans as the source of all value, and to see the rest of nature as subordinate or inferior. Usually, a critique of anthropocentrism leads us to ecocentrism, which, as a recent definition describes it, “sees all of nature as having inherent value, and is centered on nature rather than on humans.” (451)

I lean on DiCaglio to help capture the distinction between these terms here, but I also want to point out his brilliant phrasing in the interconnected context of settler colonialism, for it is here that we can locate common ground between ecology and settler colonialism; the roots of both concepts lie in “conceptual ecological displacement.” Displacement is the entire point and problem of settler colonialism as well, as Lorenzo Veracini reminds us in The Settler Colonial Present (2015): “Settler colonialism is premised on and necessitates a sovereign displacement”
(2). As we will see in my discussion of Badger Clark, Lakota displacement and ecological conquest are inextricably entwined in seminal South Dakota nature writing.

Furthermore, gender informs settler colonial anthropocentrism in South Dakota nature writing to a large degree, specifically in representations of the West and of South Dakota as a site of enacting hypermasculinity. The West has long been imagined as a place to construct one’s masculinity and the geographic West has historically been considered a highly-gendered space. For example, consider Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell’s wildly disparate, gendered treatments for neurasthenia in the early twentieth century. Mitchell, physician to both Charlotte Perkins Gilman of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” infamy as well as Theodore Roosevelt, prescribed a rest cure for women and a West cure for men. As Christine Bold points out in *The Frontier Club* (2013), Mitchell’s “rest cure,” for women consisted of “absolute bed rest, absence of intellectual or creative activity, massage, over-feeding, and, in a later refinement, electro-therapy,” while his West cure for men involved “a trip west, with as much vigorous outdoor activity and the recording of closely observed detail as possible” (59). Thus, while Gilman suffered mightily in her hideous, yellow room, Teddy Roosevelt gallivanted around North Dakota and Wyoming, shooting large game animals, living his best, strenuous life, and setting a fine example for other nervous, 90-pound weaklings in the East to emulate.

Representations in popular culture, too, particularly the genre Western, have long played an enormous role in creating the myth of the tough, laconic, fiercely independent, self-made cowboy, and there is significant overlap between this myth and Western American nature writing. As Lee Clark Mitchell points out in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996), *the* defining marker of the Western genre is a “persistent obsession with masculinity,” and Westerns are obliged to show the recurring “problem of what it means to be a man, as aging
victim of progress, embodiment of honor, [and a] champion of justice in an unjust world” (4). Jane Tompkins echoes this fixation in West of Everything (1992) with her pointed remark that “It doesn’t matter whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattlemaker or a sheepherder, a miner or a gambler. What matters is that he be a man” (18). The protagonists who litter the texts of most Western American nature writers must also invariably be manly men out there in the wilds; these authors, with the exception of Terry Tempest Williams and precious few other outliers, have historically been white, heterosexual, cis-identified men, and elements of Western American hypermasculinity are evident in works by Edward Abbey, John Muir, Gary Snyder, Rick Bass, Wallace Stegner, and numerous other writers, who largely represent the virgin wilderness as a site of personal discovery and regeneration for their rugged individualist-protagonists. In South Dakota nature writing, we see this hypermasculinity play out primarily in the cowboy poetry of Badger Clark, particularly his conquest-espousing poems “The Tale of the Hills” and “Pioneers,” both of which I address shortly.

To warp Veracini slightly, undoing ecological conquest in South Dakota is no small feat, but Courtney Huse Wika and Dan O’Brien both respond to this task productively in their respective works. Linda Hasselstrom’s work, though she demonstrates an awareness of contemporary environmental issues, offers difficult and conflicting ecological resolutions, with interesting tensions arising between the firm environmentalist stances she takes in her essays and the reification—specifically the damaging practices her poems’ speakers wreak upon the landscape and its inhabitants in everyday ranch life—of ecological colonialism in her poetry. Hasselstrom, oddly, continues the Clarkean tradition of hypermasculinity in South Dakota literature by suggesting that to succeed in the West, one needs to violently control the landscape and its inhabitants, as we see in “Shooting Prairie Dogs” and “Blackbirds,” and by actually
cheering on Western settlement in her poem “The Wild and Woolly West.” Courtney Huse Wika, however, pushes back against the anthropocentric, Clarkean tradition of settlement and violent conquest via her ecocentric representations which demonstrate her poems’ speakers nurturing the land and its inhabitants. She empathizes with and animates the Black Hills, decrying its environmental exploitation and imagining the agency of its nonhuman lives. Dan O’Brien, too, rejects the hypermasculine, anthropocentric approach to nature that underpins settler colonial conquest; his memoirs push back against history and myth with the documentation of his efforts to restore the grasslands via the reintroduction of the Northern Plains’ keystone species, bison.

“My Very Bones Will Scream Like Fifes to the Prairie Zephyr’s Breath”:

**Settler Colonial Ecologies in the Poems of Badger Clark**

Cowboy poet Charles “Badger” Clark was South Dakota’s first Poet Laureate—or “Poet Lariat,” as he christened himself—and held this post from 1937 until his death in 1957, writing from his beloved cabin, the Badger Hole, tucked away in a relatively quiet corner of Custer State Park. While Clark is best known for his poem “A Cowboy’s Prayer” (1915) and his subject matter primarily ranges from roundups to dusty trails to bunkhouses and indeed to the range, we might also consider him to be South Dakota’s first bona fide nature writer. As Barbara Barney Nelson explains in her survey of cowboy poets, “The Cowboy Nature of Cowboy Poetry” (2014): “Classic cowboy poetry is a collective tribute to nature,” and Clark’s bountiful representations of wind, wildflowers, coyotes, birds, and the landscapes of western South Dakota certainly support this designation (297). And while a settler colonial reading of Clark’s more overt, cowboyish verse would almost certainly reveal yet another strand of Manifest Destiny mythologies and probably an insight or two into lethal, Western constructions of masculinity, I
contend that Clark’s representations of nature are equally deserving of critical attention since they exemplify the more nuanced and perhaps more urgent issue of settler colonialism’s dark undertones in American nature writing.¹

Manifest Destiny and American frontier fantasies are inexplicably entwined with perceptions of nature in the United States, and have subsequently leached into American nature writing. Many critiques of these fantasies blast the very notion of wilderness itself; Diane Dufva Quantic, for example, interprets pioneer representations of nature and wilderness in Great Plains creative writing through a [Frederick Jackson] Turnerian lens in *The Nature of the Place* (1997). As Quantic bluntly puts it, “Manifest Destiny reflects the American belief that the wilderness could be conquered” (53). The harsh elements of nature, according to Quantic, offered trials and tribulations for the tough, westering homesteaders to overcome and dominate. And William Cronon, in his infamous paper “The Trouble with Wilderness” (1996), points out that the displacement of Native Americans gave settlers and their descendants the illusion of empty, untrammeled wilderness. Cronon argues that two elements gave rise to the constructed artifice which passes for American wilderness: domesticization of the sublime aesthetic, and more importantly for our consideration of Clark, the frontier. Cronon explains that “The myth of the wilderness as ‘virgin,’ uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home” (15). Both Quantic’s observations of ecological conquest and Cronon’s observation of so-called, “uninhabited” land vis-à-vis Native displacement figure largely in my consideration of Badger Clark’s representations of flowers, wind, coyotes, trees, and landscapes, with the added twists of Clark’s anthropocentric insertions and his subtle depictions of tension between settler victimization and inexplicable victory. In the first section of this chapter, I suggest a variety of ways in which
Badger Clark’s representations of nature reinscribe settler conquest in ways that stretch well beyond his overt, Wild West exhortations.

Many of Clark’s representations of nature connect to settler colonialism in complex ways, and even his quieter observations of the Black Hills and Badlands have subtle, settler undertones, particularly in his endless stream of anthropocentric insertions into natural scenes. Clark’s seemingly meditative, nature-oriented poems, which valorize pine trees, coyotes, birds, the Badlands, and more, consistently include a human interloper. While many of these incursions function as anthropocentric ruptures of natural scenes, a few appear to be slightly more benign, as we see in “The Springtime Plains,” which opens with the lines: “Heart of me, are you hearing / The drum of hoofs in the rains? / Over the Springtime plains I ride / Knee to knee with Spring” (Sun 142). This poem reflects a rider reveling in the marvels of spring on the Northern Plains, which include encounters with wild horses and coyotes; however, Clark represents the plains themselves as a character who welcomes this rider, in all of his Manifest Destiny-decreed entitlement, into its wild landscape.

Other examples of Clark’s anthropocentric intrusions are more overt and jarring, reflecting nature’s supposed cruelty and victimizing the speaker in an echo of western American settlement’s largest and most illogical contradiction: that settlers themselves were victims. We usually think of this victimization in sociopolitical terms, by which I mean the inaccurate but dominant, frontier perception of Natives as ruthless savages who, as American cultural and political institutions claim, terrorized westering, white Americans, who inexplicably prevailed anyway. Historian Richard White explains this bizarre logical leap in Ken Burns’s documentary The West (1996) by declaring, “There’s something deeply weird about this. It’s conquest won without the guilt. We didn’t plan it, they attacked us, and when we ended up, we had the whole
continent” (Burns). In Clark’s “Prairie Wind,” we see a similar victimization taking place, and in this case, nature replaces Natives as the settlers’ terrorizer. Clark’s speaker begins by describing the power of the Northern Plains’s wind that he endured earlier in life:

> It hissed through the shaken grasses, rushing and swirling by,
> Flailing the empty land all day under an empty sky,
> And I looked out of the window,—a boy of six or so—
> Wondering where the wind came from and whither
> It all could go. (Sky 26)

Here we see the power and relentlessness of the Plains’s omnipresent gales, those same, merciless gusts and blows that drove Per Hansa’s wife Beret mad in O.E. Rölvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927). These winds persist throughout the poem and in one of Clark’s most colorful lines in all of his oeuvre, we learn that they terrorize the speaker as an old man:

> I’m fifty years from the homestead, but even down to death
> My very bones will scream like fifes to the prairie zephyr’s breath.
> And still it streams through the coulees in swift and sibilant flow
> And I still wonder whence it comes and whither it all can go. (Sky 27)

In these final lines, Clark’s old homesteader-speaker, a settler colonist reminiscing about days on contested land, has become a victim of nature, with his bones about to be played “like fifes” by the brutal winds.³
And to further underscore White’s explanation of the “deeply weird,” cognitively dissonant notion of American settlers as victimized victors, Clark represents settler colonists as conquerors of nature in a number of poems. Consider, for instance, his poem “You’re Hog-Tied, Old Cheyenne,” written to commemorate the building of a bridge over the Cheyenne River in Fall River County, in which Clark’s speaker gloats about the newly-tamed river and addresses it in second-person. In the third and penultimate stanza, Clark writes:

You checked the hardy pioneers;
You cramped the Indian war;
You fetched the schoolma’am’s angry tears;
You made the cowboy roar;
The guy who went to see his girl
Must put you in his plan,
But now we don’t care how you swirl;
You’re hogtied, old Cheyenne. (37)

I concede that the speaker acknowledges the river’s formerly formidable agency here, but to announce that nobody cares “how you swirl” anymore and to follow up immediately with the declaration that “you’re hogtied” gives the poem a flippant, mocking tone and suggests that the river has been irrevocably conquered by human endeavor. The river hasn’t been dammed but only bridged, yet Clark seems to imply that nature has come under permanent human control. He makes a similar move in his miniature epic poem “The Tale of the Hills,” and goes even further, twinning the assertion of conquest over nature with the conquest of Native peoples in the name of Manifest Destiny:

Then from the eastern land, the white man came.
Driven by high desire and restless blood.
He to the prairies made his lordly claim,
And fought the red man there to make it good.
Far on the plains the dust cloud and the fire
Marked the long trails the conquering white man made.
But still no iron hoof or wagon tire
Rang on the rocks within the canyon’s shade. (Boots 5)

Clark’s settler ecopoetics in “The Tale of the Hills,” wrought in the selfsame, rigid iambic pentameter that sailed to American shores with Anne Bradstreet, reflect the durability of settler colonial attitudes in the United States in general but particularly in South Dakota; Clark offers his revisionist, Anglocentric origin story of the Black Hills, which are unceded treaty land, in this poem. And while the iron hoof and wagon tire arrive in Clark’s next stanza, along with General George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh Cavalry, in this stanza, we see not only sociopolitical but also ecological conquest well underway prior to Clark’s imagining Custer’s arrival. Also, in the third line of this stanza, we get a sense of Manifest Destiny’s divine decree in the phrase “lordly claim,” and later Clark suggests that the settlers are so hypermasculine and so powerful that even at this early stage, they have begun to exert control over the landscape by making trails and setting blazes. This controlling, nonconsensual dominance of the landscape, in the context of Clark’s hypermasculine West, is akin to an assault. With the arrival of the settlers, Clark seems to suggest, comes rape and pillage.

Finally, Clark’s poem “Pioneers” offers a slightly different version of nature and conquest, suggesting that an exceptionalist, indomitable pioneer spirit and the settlers’ innate toughness will render nature’s objective hazards beneath their notice. Clark rhapsodizes:
Pioneers! Pioneers! the quicksands where you wallowed,

The rocky hills and thirsty plains—they hardly won

Your heed.

You snatched the thorny chance, broke the trail that

others followed

For sheer joy, for dear joy of marching in the lead. (Sky Lines 24)

His lines “they hardly won / Your heed” enacts this notion of toughness and invincibility; these pioneers, according to Clark, were unstoppable and Western expansion thus inevitable. We can almost picture the dust clouds rising from beneath their encroaching boots and wagon wheels as they press ever westward. Nature, in this poem, seems to be easily dismissed and not even consequential enough to warrant its status as an adversary to be overcome. Here, too, in the breaking of the trail, we get a sense of the so-called virgin wilderness’s deflowering with the arrival of the settlers.

“On a Downhill Slide Since the First White Man Set Foot Here”:

Place, the Ordinary, and Settler Blind Spots in the Works of Linda Hasselstrom

Linda M. Hasselstrom, Badger Clark super-fan and literary heir apparent, is perhaps South Dakota’s most prolific and enthusiastic nature writer, having published—at last count—16 books of poetry and nonfiction. A self-proclaimed environmental activist and literary booster, Hasselstrom aims to position South Dakota as a site of literary production, a daunting task that is palpable in her work, and she mentors other aspiring burgeoning Great Plains writers—or did in pre-COVID-19 times—at her Windbreak House Writing Retreats on her family’s ranch near Hermosa. The writing retreat page on her elaborate author’s website describes her as “one of the strongest voices on behalf of the prairie” (Hasselstrom). According to the one of her biographical
websites on that same site, “Linda’s Bare Bones Chronology,” Linda was born in Texas in 1943 and moved to South Dakota in 1948, graduating from Rapid City High School in 1961 and from the University of South Dakota—with dual degrees in English and Journalism—in 1965, later receiving her M.A. in American literature from the University of Missouri in 1969 (Hasselstrom). Much of her work details her keen observations of her personal geography’s minutiae, as we see, for example, in her poetry collections *Dakota Bones* (1993) and its revision *Dakota Bones, Grass, Sky* (2017), her collection of essays *Land Circle: Writings Collected from the Land* (1991), and of course, her best-known work, the epistolary memoir *Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains* (1987). In her preface to *Windbreak*, Hasselstrom offers a key contradiction which courses throughout her oeuvre and which notes the tension between ranching and environmentalism, explaining that “I’d like to combine my separate existences as rancher and environmentalist, but both sides sometimes view me with suspicion, and I come into conflict with each on occasion” (x). Although she pitches this tension as perhaps the greatest problem in her body of work, in the context of ecocriticism and settler colonialism at least, other, equally pressing conflicts arise: the numerous, difficult moments in her texts such as her sense of entitlement to the land and landscape, her occasional glorification of Western expansion, and her blithe acceptance of at least a degree of animal cruelty caused by ranching. In this section of this chapter, I suggest ways in which Linda Hasselstrom exemplifies the tensions and contradictions of environmentally conscious place-making in a settler state.

Hasselstrom relentlessly chronicles the minutiae of ordinary life on her ranch, which in turn informs her environmentalist stances as well as her deep sense of place, and I therefore turn to the interdisciplinary field of Everyday Studies in my attempt to make sense of these contradictions in Hasselstrom’s work. In her essay “Quotidian Wests” (2020), Nancy Cook
deftly explains how the everyday expands the definition of place beyond locale and offers new reading strategies for Western texts, ones which take up habits, familiarity, temporalities, spatialities, and beyond, with the result that “while place remains historically contingent, with this approach it is accessed through representations of everyday life” (167). In Hasselstrom’s case, the cultural, legal, and sociopolitical structures of South Dakotan settler colonialism are deeply sedimented, so ingrained over time that in everyday life that they have become banal and go unquestioned. These structures, considered a foregone conclusion by the dominant, colonizing culture at large, thus work to reinscribe her deep sense of place, emerging even into her representations of nature. Hasselstrom’s chronicling of her habits, her treatment of weather as neither good nor bad but simply as circumstances to be dealt with, and her inclination to mercilessly record the mundane in nature rather than employing, to use Cook’s term, “grand plots,” ultimately allows her the settler privilege of maintaining her blind spots and over-valorizing Western expansion (170).

Hasselstrom’s quotidian life facilitates her deep sense of place and her connection to her land to a significant extent. As she claims in Windbreak, “Country people generally realize that our families are not divisible from our land; our beliefs about both family and land grow out of everyday practices, rather than theory” (67). Hasselstrom insinuates here that her quotidian practices, even the most mundane bit of minutiae including how to best prepare for weather extremes or which direction her pickup should face when she parks it, inform her sense of place. One of her most striking illustrations, which supports her assertion about everyday practices, is her often-nonchalant inclusions of weather descriptions in dates in her journal-like first book, Windbreak. On the Custer County plains, weather certainly contributes to giving this place its place-ness. Some of her dates and temperatures—usually in summer unless a wicked hailstorm
occurs—preceding her entries contain no weather description, as we see for July 6, which reads only “Low 93, high 110” (175). Those are very high temperatures yet unremarkable enough to merit further description. Her winter entries, on the other hand, usually include a brief comment outlining any notable weather conditions. Some of these comments are curt and prosaic; in her entry for December 9, she writes: “Low -25, high -10; the wind stopped in the night” (56). While this may have been a minor and fleeting relief for Hasselstrom, she doesn’t note it, which suggests that the wind’s stopping, at its core, was a nonevent. Hasselstrom knows from her decades on that ranch that the wind will certainly start again, and probably sooner rather than later.

During those decades on the ranch, Hasselstrom develops and fine-tunes her daily rituals and responses to the weather, transforming space into place and gaining intimate place-knowledge with every experience and each passing storm. She offers her stark philosophy of wind and weather later in Windbreak, explaining that “nature simply doesn’t care one way or the other. She gives us a set of circumstances. What we do with those circumstances, whether or not we survive, is up to us” (72). This philosophy comes from decades of experiencing the ever-present wind and weather. She’s not victimized by it as Badger Clark’s speaker in “Prairie Wind” is, but she doesn’t necessarily valorize it either; contending with weather is just a part of her everyday life. In fact, in “Poet of the Wind: An Interview with Linda Hasselstrom” (2001), Lee Ann Roripaugh asks Hasselstrom about the “haunting presence” of wind in her poems, and in her response, Hasselstrom denies consciously emphasizing the ever-present Dakota wind, reiterating here, too, her philosophy: “Wind is simply there and must be accommodated” (13). Here Hasselstrom acknowledges that the wind inevitably appears in her work but denies including it on purpose since she is so used to it. Her decades of experience even allow her to
sense when spring actually arrives on the ranch, which rarely has anything to do with an arbitrary proclamation on the Gregorian calendar. Her poem “Seasons in South Dakota” opens with the lines “Dirty snow left in the gullies, pale / green spread overnight on the hills / mark spring” (Dakota 8). This speaker identifies these markers as harbingers of spring, having been through enough winters there to be able to identify its arrival.

Furthermore, the ordinary facilitates her connections to the land and Hasselstrom’s deep sense of place in other interesting ways, such as her nightly rituals. In the final stanza of “Seasons in South Dakota,” Hasselstrom notes the slowing of time when she ceases her ranch work for the day and carves out specific moments to rest and to grieve by the fire. In that last stanza, her speaker declares:

Despite the feeding, pitching hay to black cows with frost-rimmed eyes,
cutting ice on the dam under the eyes
of sky and one antelope,
there’s still time to sit beside the fire,
curse the dead cold outside,
the other empty chair. (Dakota 9)

The quotidian is defined by habit, ritual, repetition, and as Ben Highmore and Rita Felski both point out in their respective works on the ordinary, temporality. As Felski explains in Doing Time (2000), “Above all, everyday life is a temporal term. As such, it conveys the fact of repetition; it refers not to the singular or the unique but to that which happens ‘day after day’” (81). Hasselstrom’s busy speaker’s list of ranch tasks marks an efficient, sped-up work-time in her first three lines—and since the dam is frozen, we can assume that the days are quite short so there is even less time to accomplish all of these chores. Time slows in the final three lines, and
the speaker’s declaration that “there’s still time” suggests that she makes certain that she takes time for this practice, and does so frequently, if not nightly—to have, as it were, time where she is still. I concede that she seems to break with her own philosophy of weather to some degree in this stanza, cursing it rather than accommodating it, but we get the sense that no matter how cold it is, she’s going to get up before sunrise and do it all over again. And at the same time, Hasselstrom notes a bit of a rupture in the quotidian in the final line: this speaker notices, dwells upon, and grieves the empty chair, which suggests that she is adjusting to a newfound absence. As Highmore notes in Ordinary Lives (2011), “Beds, chairs, and clothes accommodate us: most of the time they receive ‘our daily inattention.’ We don’t notice them, but we do interact with them” (58). Hasselstrom’s speaker does not zone out, entering what Highmore terms a state of drift; instead, she notices the chair and its emptiness, which in turn points to a sense of loss and mourning. That chair’s former state of being occupied—which happened frequently enough for her to notice that it is empty—and the memories of it constituted the ordinary for the speaker, and she has not yet adjusted to the jolt of its occupant’s absence.

And while this deep sense of place inspires Hasselstrom to want to protect the landscape, it also reinscribes rigid, settler colonial notions of land entitlement that extends well beyond land deeds. I term these difficult moments in her texts settler blind spots. For example, throughout the collected essays in Land Circle, Hasselstrom outlines her own vision of an Aldo Leopoldian land ethic, even poaching his phrasing to describe her close relationship with the land in her titular essay: “I was adopted by the land, and began developing a personal land ethic the first time I looked out on the empty, rolling prairie around my home” (Land Circle 240). In her case, she fosters her own community on her ranch and serves as its guardian, which in turn informs her ranching practices and purchases: “I can refuse to buy plastic or styrofoam, because no one
knows how to get rid of them. I can refuse to use harmful chemicals on my cows or my weeds. And I can tell everyone who will listen, willingly or not, why I am doing these things; some of those listeners will learn, some will vote, some may make laws” (256). This intimacy with the land and the responsibility for it—of single-handedly confronting late capitalism in a ruby-red state that is hardly known for its sterling environmental policies—gives rise to a difficult moment in her memoir Feels Like Far (1999). Here, Hasselstrom’s deep sense of place suggests a preconceived mistrust of her successors as well as rigid, settler colonial thinking:

Whoever occupies this land after I die will understand little of its history. She won’t know where to take shelter, walking home in chilly rain when the pickup’s stuck in that nasty mud hold in the summer pasture. He won’t understand that the willow patch below my house really belongs to the old doe and her daughters. In thirty of forty years, a new owner might learn some basics—might even manage to build a herd as well adapted to this place as ours—if his ownership lasted that long. (216)

While her mistrust and disparagement of incoming greenhorns is amusing and probably justified, given that it took decades for her to figure out how to best do these things, Hasselstrom’s ingrained, everyday practices here seem to lead to this sense of settler entitlement in this sticky moment in the text in that it also dismisses her predecessors.

In fact, this snarky aside is not only Anglocentric and anthropocentric but also autocentric, unable to imagine a different subjectivity at all. As Doreen Massey reminds us in Space, Place, and Gender (1994), place can be connected to just this sort of exclusion: “Since the late 1980s the world has seen the recrudescence of exclusivist claims to places—nationalist, regionalist, and localist. All of them have been attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities, and to claim them for one’s own” (4). In
Hasselstrom’s case, this moment suggests that for all of her stewardship, the meaning of the ranch has become fixed, able to accommodate only her subjectivity and discounting any history of previous inhabitants, including the Lakota people. Hasselstrom seems to forget or dismiss those histories in this moment, which I consider to be one of many settler colonial blind spots in her work. And at the same time, that mistrust of her successors, too, is problematic in that it denies them their agency and dismisses their delight or satisfaction in figuring out their own place-knowledge.

In addition to that tricky and sedimented sense of place that can give rise to those sorts of textual moments, Hasselstrom’s settler blind spots manifest in her use of the quotidian to rationalize her valorization of pioneers, which contradicts the moments in her books where she positions herself as a booster—if not an ally—of Native culture. For example, in *Windbreak*, Hasselstrom recounts her experience teaching writing workshops on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Aware of the Anglocentric tendencies of the American literary canon and sensing the need for Native representation, Hasselstrom reads them poetry by James Welch: “Nothing is quite as silent as the silence of brown eyes, brown impassive faces. I read James Welch’s poem ‘Christmas Comes to Moccasin Flat,’ to the seventh and eighth graders today because it reminds me of Pine Ridge” (31). Hasselstrom is excited to read Welch to her pupils and thrilled to be there at all to provide a bit of relief and encouragement since the school’s teachers “really seem to expect no scholastic behavior from the kids; they just want them to learn normal white behavior. Many of the teachers are wives of white ranchers and dislike Indians. Qualified Indian teachers are reportedly kept away by politics” (31). Here Hasselstrom points out how the enduring structures of settler colonialism extend beyond the boarding school era into contemporary reservation education, and in moments like these in her books, she seems to
encourage Native sovereignty. In another such moment, this one in the ecological context of her essay “Where Neighbor Is a Verb,” she proclaims that “Great Plains civilization has been on a downhill slide since the first white man set foot here” (*Land Circle* 72). Here Hasselstrom points out that development of the Great Plains may have been a grievous ecological—if not sociopolitical—error.

But Hasselstrom’s immense body of work contains numerous inconsistencies with her position as Native cultural booster and defender of the prairie, including her representations of nature and its ordinariness. These, too, are settler blind spots. One overt, strictly settler colonial example of how her cultural boosterism’s inconsistencies emerge in her representations is her poem “The Wild and Woolly West,” which recounts the exploits of Jesse James, General Custer, Wild Bill Hickok, and Calamity Jane. Throughout the poem, Hasselstrom’s speaker uses a flippant, nearly Badger Clark-esque tone, and the first three stanzas begin with the nostalgic clause “Those were the days” (*Land Circle* 45). The speaker’s strident tone and apparent nostalgia simultaneously valorize the mythic West and cheer on its masculinity-enacting participants. Also, in the first and third stanza, Hasselstrom’s speaker follows that clause with the noun “boys,” which marks a gendered delineation; this speaker knows her audience, and she is pandering to their own hopes of enacting masculinity in the West. And in the third stanza, the speaker unleashes an unbridled valorization of settler colonialism with the lines “Those were the days, boys, / when the white man / civilized / the West” (*Land Circle* 45). Here we see a repetition of the dominant frontier myth, just as we do in Clark and countless other cultural representations of the American West; but Hasselstrom’s aforementioned moments of boosterism provide an added layer of friction. Badger Clark may not be attempting to soften the blow of settler colonial conquest, but he is a known quantity and doesn’t claim otherwise.
Such moments of settler boosterism resonate in an ecological context, too, as we see in the relatively benign meeting of the quotidian and nature under the aegis of settler colonialism. For example, Hasselstrom’s “Homesteading in Dakota” poem begins: “It was a typical prairie homestead: / a hundred sixty dusty acres / with not one tree” (Dakota 34). Here, although Hasselstrom describes the habits and particularities of one settler family for the rest of the poem, her use of the word “typical” cements this poem firmly in the realm of the ordinary, quietly valorizing American western expansionism. The “hundred sixty” acres are the amount prescribed by the Homestead Act of 1862, while her word choice “dusty” suggests that they have been hard at work plowing, participating in the Great Plow-Up of the Great Plains, which will ultimately culminate in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. None of those harms, however, appear or are alluded to; the poem simply continues its project of documenting the settler family’s quotidian in detail until its closing lines, which suggests a tacit—if quiet—approval, a testament to the durability—and seeming inevitability—of settler colonialism.

And in her poem “Settlers,” Hasselstrom makes a similar move, documenting the different Northern European countries that the settlers came from in an awed tone and never mentioning Natives or their displacement at all, further reinscribing settlement as preordained. In the second and final stanza, that first generation of settlers dies, and the speaker echoes Hasselstrom’s own Leopoldian land ethic of nature and community. Her speaker intones:

One by one, the earth touched them;
they touched the earth, stretched
to crumble clods, to smell the soil.
They met the land, made it neighbor, friend,
respected enemy; partner, brother, father, wife—
a home, a land to hold the generations’ bones. (Dakota 62)

Hasselstrom represents the deaths as ordinary and natural here, with no spectacular circumstances surrounding them. The settlers simply decompose into the land they have befriended. In the final line, Hasselstrom’s speaker raises the issue of home, which is a fraught term in both Everyday Studies and Place Studies, and here we see an additional complication of settler colonialism. As Felski puts it, “The idea of home is complex and temporally fluid . . . any individual life story will contain different and changing visions of home,” and she asserts that the notion of home “acquires particularly poignant meanings for migrants and their descendants” (88). Settlers are *not* migrants, however, as Veracini attests so vociferously, and the treatment of them here as benign wanderers decomposing into the welcoming earth, eventually to be joined by subsequent generations, oversimplifies and overlooks the trouble with declaring a contested space as home.9

A third settler blind spot emerges in Hasselstrom’s philosophy of environmentally friendly ranching and her representations of the ecological damage caused by ranching as ordinary occurrences. Hasselstrom critiques the intersection of settler colonialism and late capitalism in “Where Neighbor Is a Verb,” asserting that settler ideology lay at the heart of environmental degradation: “When white people occupied this country in large numbers, we believed this abundant land could be exploited wildly without being destroyed, but we were wrong. We do not have the right to destroy; our current behavior toward the earth, influenced by our attitude toward work and profit, has led us to the edge of disaster” (Land Circle 79). However, many of her poems reflect very dubious land management practices, treating them with deference and imbuing them with ordinariness. Ultimately, by treating these traditional
ranching practices as ordinary, Hasselstrom reifies the anthropocentric, hypermasculine tenets of settler colonialism.

Consider, for instance, her poem “Shooting Prairie Dogs,” in which the speaker recounts picking off so-called varmints with a firearm. The opening stanza conveys familiarity with this practice; the speaker knows precisely what to do and does it without ceremony: “I lie down in the short grass, / sight in on a fat brown pup. His / shrill voice pipes over dirt mounds. / He bobs down, up, tail twitching” (Dakota 25). This speaker clearly does this regularly, probably because their holes can trip cattle, destroy grasses, and cause other problems. The speaker kills him in the third stanza: “Hit, he / jerks, topples, drops. When I kick him / he rolls over bloody, moving with fleas / like a migrating blanket” (Dakota 25). Prairie dogs have become a problem for ranchers on the Northern Plains and in the interior West due to the elimination of their primary predator, the now-endangered black-footed ferret. According to Marty Durlin’s article “Black-Footed Ferrets Are Saved from Extinction, but Where Will They Live?” (2007) for High Country News, “The ferrets depend completely upon prairie dogs for both food and shelter. One ferret can eat about 110 prairie dogs in a year” (Durlin). One ecological restoration effort made by forward-thinking ranchers and biologists in the West is to reintroduce the black-footed ferret, but we see no such overtures in this poem. Instead, we have a speaker who not only shoots the prairie dog but then kicks it after he dies. Oddly, Hasselstrom’s speaker sounds very casual about the entire episode, despite her having positioned herself as a defender of the prairie. Her familiarity with this ritual suggests that she’s done this before, and with her “defender of the prairie” claim in mind, prairie becomes a slippery signifier in this context. The term prairie, in this light, signifies the anthropocentric, everyday life and attitude of a commodity agricultural producer who routinely makes decisions which privilege some life forms over others, rather than the prairie we
might expect from an ardent environmentalist’s ecocentric worldview. As Terry Tempest Williams admonishes in *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (2009), “Prairie dogs create diversity. / Destroy them and you destroy a varied world” (37). Hasselstrom’s version of *prairie*, however, does not take the necessity of biodiversity into account.

We see a similarly sticky moment in the third stanza of “Blackbirds,” when the moving tractor destroys a blackbird nest: “The sickle blade cuts down the nest; / four blackbird chicks ride it, cheeping, / into the grass. The hovering pair flies away. / a buzzard circles” (*Dakota* 14). While Hasselstrom might just be capturing the reality of what happens when a field is plowed, this is an ironic scene given her self-declared mantle of defender of the prairie. There is *nothing* natural about this nest’s demise, in fact, but the speaker treats it as an ordinary occurrence, and here, too, the rancher-speaker decides which life forms get to live and which do not. Then, in a curious shift, the speaker moves onto the fourth stanza and glorifies the birds: “I walk through willows where more nests hang: / a male hunches his shoulders and hisses, / flaring his red plumage” (*Dakota* 14). This is a very strange moment in this poem; the speaker, having just mowed down a blackbird nest, now delights in the plenties and mysteries of nature. These contradictory moments of environmental philosophy and poetic representations of Hasselstrom’s quotidian ranch practices gesture toward an environmental idealism locking horns with stubborn tendencies to still practice and exalt in ecological conquest. *All of you consumers with your plastic coolers and your Mountain Dew bottles and your Taco Bell wrappers are in error,* Hasselstrom seems to tell us, *but I’m going to sit out here and enjoy my sunrise in the Custer County foothills and then mow down some bird nests and later, maybe blow some prairie dogs away after lunch—if I feel like it.* This contradiction, I contend, comes from everyday practices and the subjectivity of the ordinary, and in this case, the inflexible ranch practices of old have
probably carried down from previous generations. Since those agricultural practices worked and continue to work, problematic as they may be, perhaps she felt no inclination to try a different approach that would better support the Northern Plains’s delicate ecological balance and defend the prairie for its own sake, rather than for commodity agriculture.

“Find a Table in the Wilderness under Which to Dream”:

Courtney Huse Wika’s Subversion of Settler Colonial Ecologies

In this chapter thus far, we have seen the genesis of South Dakota nature writing with Badger Clark’s body of work and the ways in which they reinscribe settler conquest. These threads persist into the work of Clark’s heir apparent to settler ecologies, Linda Hasselstrom, and although she aspires to be a defender of the landscape, as her essays insist, her nature poems, like Clark’s, valorize settlers, laud ecological conquest, and ultimately show the staggering degree to which settler colonialism remains inextricably bound to South Dakota nature writing. I want to continue along this poetic lineage and turn now to the work of Courtney Huse Wika, who claims Hasselstrom as a regional inspiration but makes a clean break with the poetic tradition of settler valorization. A devoted professor, bird enthusiast, nature lover, and tender of an impressive clowder of rescue cats, Huse Wika is a fourth-generation South Dakotan and a graduate of the M.A. and Ph.D. programs in creative writing at the University of South Dakota. Huse Wika currently teaches creative writing and literature courses at Black Hills State University in Spearfish, and her creative work has appeared in *Kindred, Midwestern Gothic, Paddlefish*, and *605 Magazine*, among others, as well as in the collections *Life on the Farm and Ranch* (2009) and *South Dakota in Poems* (2020). In 2016, Anchor and Plume Press published her chapbook *Perch*, a collection of nature poems from which I draw heavily in this section, and her 2021 collection *This Bird Is Trying to Break Your Heart* is awaiting publication.
Huse Wika, too, grapples with the fraught issue of placemaking on the Plains by settler descendants, a problem which I addressed in my earlier discussion of Hasselstrom. Huse Wika makes it clear that she feels most at home in South Dakota, and that the landscape and its vicissitudes have left its indelible print upon her. One key difference in Huse Wika’s work, however, is her subject matter, firmly grounded in contemporaneity and focused upon home, place, familial relationships, disappointment, loss, grief, and perhaps most notably, nature, rather than the nature writing warped by worn, Old West tropes as practiced by her literary Plains forebears. In the introduction to her creative dissertation *Point Lonely* (2008), she muses, “To be honest, I never thought I would be a regional writer. And perhaps it’s too soon to call myself one now because I am unsure if I do justice to this land and its people, but the presence of the South Dakota landscape is undeniable in my work” (ix). Although she does not descend into pioneer nostalgia in her representations, as Clark and Hasselstrom unabashedly do, Huse Wika affirms that for her, South Dakota is her home, which underscores Veracini’s observation that “settler colonial relationships to place and between peoples are now completely naturalised” (95). Huse Wika’s work shows the powerful connections to place that can develop from generation after generation of settlers’ descendants growing their own roots deep into the land. But while Huse Wika could easily have inherited and practiced this South Dakota settlers’ poetic tradition of pioneer valorization, she rejects it, which is itself a quiet, literary act of undoing both sociopolitical and ecological conquest. And in her dissertation introduction, Huse Wika, in fact, credits Hasselstrom and other Great Plains writers for demonstrating that rurality can be a viable and valuable site of cultural production since these authors “recreate for their readers the truth of the Midwest through vivid imagery and authentic settings.” Where once I thought I had to seek out the populace and pollution of cities to find ‘the real world,’ the truth of life, these writers
helped me to understand that my truth exists where I do, where I feel most at home” (xii).
Validated by her predecessors but unbound to their tradition, however, Huse Wika breaks completely with the poetic lineage which valorizes ecological settler colonialism that we have seen thus far in the works of Badger Clark and Linda Hasselstrom. Instead, as I argue in this section, Huse Wika counters the dominant South Dakota ideology of ecological conquest through her representations of nature, which demonstrate ecocentric empathy with the nonhuman and at the same time, assert and celebrate nature’s agency.

Before I begin my analysis of Huse Wika’s ecocentricism, I want to press a bit further than I did in my introductory remarks and explore her notion of South Dakota as home to underscore the importance of her refusal to celebrate settler colonialism and ecological conquest. In Huse Wika’s essay “On Finding Home” (2009), an almost-Hasselstrom-esque, settler blind spot moment could be read into her statement that “though I’ve had my chances, I’ve not left my home state. What I have learned during my life here is that this is my land, as bleak as it may sometimes seem. My grandparents’ families came from Norway and settled in, most as farmers” (80-81, my emphasis). On the surface, this statement does admittedly appear to have settler colonial implications; however, Huse Wika, isn’t claiming the land as her birthright decreed by Manifest Destiny in this proclamation. I pointed to Jodi Byrd’s crucial observation about circumstances and contingencies for not only arrivants but also settlers in my discussion of Oscar Micheaux’s arrivant colonialism; and in Huse Wika’s case, as a Norwegian settler-descendant who staunchly resists the urge to celebrate Western expansionism in her work, Byrd’s assertion bears repeating here—though in a settler colonial rather than arrivant colonial context—to defend Huse Wika’s place-claiming in South Dakota. Byrd declares that “If colonialism has forced the native to ‘cathect the space of the Other on his home ground,’ as Spivak tells us, then
imperialism has forced settlers and arrivants to cathect the space of the native as their home” (Byrd). Huse Wika’s Norwegian ancestors permanently settled in South Dakota in their quest for a better life, and eventually their family produced a remarkable poet who, though not indigenous, generates vital, place-based, nature-oriented work about South Dakota which doesn’t celebrate settler conquest or contradict itself regularly with settler blind spots, a key difference between Huse Wika’s poetry and the Clark-Hasselstrom lineage with which she breaks.

Instead, Huse Wika’s work emphasizes her own close connection to the South Dakota landscape and simultaneously attempts to position South Dakota as a place worth writing about at all, with her personal geographies imbued with memory at the locus of her transforming South Dakota’s wide-open spaces into meaningful places. Consider, for instance, the fourth stanza of her poem “Grasslands,” in which the speaker wonders if her grandmother, who gazes upon the Missouri River daily, ever wished to be somewhere else: “If I had been older, wiser, I would have asked her / if she’s ever wanted something / other than the long stretches of sunflowers, / the amber expanse of winter wheat” (32). These South Dakotan features, which constitute the everyday for the speaker and her grandmother, suddenly strike the speaker as banal if not outright stifling. After a few more stanzas of imagining what other South Dakotan elements her grandmother might have wanted to give up in exchange for more grandiose wildlife or landscapes, the speaker realizes, in the final two stanzas:

I know she wouldn’t have even have looked up,

framed in the slow-setting sun

reflecting off the river,

but she would have answered:
In these lines, we can discern the grandmother’s connection to South Dakota and the deep sense of place cultivated by a lifetime there, unmarred by a yearning for grander scenes or more temperate climes. Here, too, although that imagined retort is endearingly gruff, Huse Wika’s lines evoke her strong connection to her grandmother, who taught her daughter and granddaughter to respect the land, its shifting tempers, and the creatures which dwell there. In her dissertation’s dedication to “the women who have come before me,” Huse Wika memorializes this familial closeness and its ecological implications, proclaiming the multigenerational trio to be “three women of the same heart, that in our blood run the same secrets and sorrows and stories, and what my grandmother has discovered, so has my mother, and I from her” (iii). Notably, this closeness to each other is not merely anthropocentric but instead ecocentric and matrilineal. This trio of women protect and nurture the land rather than reifying settler colonialism’s patriarchal structures of conquest. Instead, they constitute a quiet but significant force that extends to a feeling of responsibility for it and its nonhuman inhabitants: “And it’s written in the things you cannot see: the way our laughs echo one another, sudden like August hail. The fierceness of our love. The way we carry turtles across highways, scoop Box Elder bugs from the animals’ water dishes and find them dry land, bury the fledglings we find broken at the base of trees” (iii). These quiet, collective acts are a far cry from Hasselstrom’s ever-mounting, poeticized body count of blackbirds and prairie dogs, and from Clark’s claims of victimization by the Dakota winds and declarations of domination over the land. Huse Wika’s sense of place, the responsibility of stewardship she feels it entails, and her firm rejection of South Dakotan settler ecologies work collectively to counter ecological conquest.
One recurrent and ecocentric thread that courses through Huse Wika’s poetry is her speakers’ empathy for living creatures. *Perch* includes two elegies for dead birds, “Macroura” and “The Art of Seeing Things.” In both poems, her speakers’ responses to the deceased birds brim with grief and remorse. In “Macroura,” a stray cat that had been passing through kills a mourning dove that had been a regular at the speaker’s birdfeeder in her yard and the speaker witnesses her feathered friend’s corpse, “nestled between fat grey paws. A vagrant / who could not have known / this was your home” (18). Though the speaker gives the cat the benefit of the doubt for not knowing any better, she mourns the bird, opening the poem with her burial of the bird: “I buried my grief today / wrapped softly in a striped dishtowel / beneath the oak where you fed quietly among the afternoon grackles” (18). The speaker honors this bird, picking a meaningful tree for its final resting place, feeling, perhaps, that the act of burying it might atone somewhat for human civilization and its accoutrements, which includes an overpopulation of stray and feral cats. The burial constitutes an ecocentric act, reconciling nature and culture. As Joshua DiCaglio rethinks the deep ecological concepts of eco- and anthropocentrism in his essay “Ironic Ecology” (2015), explaining that “in relation to a critique of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism becomes an act of resituating two conceptually intact entities: nature and humans” (451-52). In the mourning dove’s case, the poem’s speaker accords this avian victim of civilization its last rites, and in the penultimate stanza, Huse Wika reiterates the importance of not only burying the bird but doing it properly: “I was thankful when the dirt gave / easily beneath the shovel’s blade, / that the wind had dried it enough / to fall softly, to bury you well” (18). This speaker accords the dove the same respect we might expect for a beloved pet or perhaps—a burial of a family member in the relaxed legal realm of rurality.
A similarly ecocentric and elegiac moment appears in “The Art of Seeing Things,” and in this case, the bird is not a regular visitor to her yard but is instead discovered dead in the street, a tiny, feathered corpse lying dead on the cement. The fact of its birdness, however, is enough to command respect by the poem’s speaker and her friend, and her friend removes it from the pavement to preserve its dignity, even in death:

The next day you stopped to pull a northern flicker from the street,
his wings mantled to the ground.

You wished you could have buried him
under sedum and sage like a promise
but the soil was bitter with winter narratives. (Perch 28)

In this poem, South Dakota’s winter-frozen ground and seasonally dormant plants prevent the dignified burial we witnessed in “Macroura,” but the act of removing the bird from the street to prevent its further maiming as well as the desire to bury the flicker properly are noteworthy, indicating an ecocentric worldview which empathizes with birds and animals, and thus quietly seeks to undo ecological conquest. In this case, the pavement won, but the speaker’s friend shows admirable intentions and—for a South Dakotan—unusual remorse. 12

Empathy arises yet again, this time coupled with plant agency, in Huse Wika’s poem “Pine for Me.” Here, the speaker broods over the fates of birds hunted for sport, and this intensely sorrowful poem opens with the lines “When the turkeys bullet from their sleep, / the pines feel their absence” (Perch 30). While turkeys suddenly rousing and departing is almost certain to make a significant racket, Huse Wika isn’t actually taking much poetic license here; her speaker’s unusual use of “bullet” as a verb points directly to hunting. The Oxford English
Dictionary offers only one entry for bullet as a verb; it is “an isolated use” of a transitive verb which means “to shoot with a bullet” (“Bullet”). I will address the pines in a moment, but I first want to emphasize Huse Wika’s uniquely ecocentric point of view, pitted against the very anthropocentric and dominant world of hunting in South Dakota. While New Western forms of recreation such as rock climbing, cross country skiing, mountain biking, hiking, paddle-boarding, wildlife photography, and so forth are slowly coming into their own in South Dakota, hunting remains synonymous with sport and the outdoors for most residents and visitors. According to the South Dakota Department of Tourism’s website:

When the cornstalks turn brown, South Dakota turns orange. The October weekend that opens pheasant season is basically a holiday as visitors and residents take to the fields in a state known for being home to the nation’s best pheasant hunting . . . Pheasant hunters aren’t the only ones to create and maintain these traditions. South Dakota also offers opportunities to hunt big game, waterfowl, turkey and more. Friendly hosts, private lodges and more than one million acres of publicly accessible hunting land within the primary pheasant range welcome both residents and nonresidents to this world-class hunting haven. (“Hunting”)

Huse Wika’s “Pine for Me,” therefore, quietly rebukes South Dakota’s anthropocentric state pastime. I concede that many hunters simply want to put food on the table for their families, and that venison, pheasant, and wild turkey are certainly healthier fare than mass-produced meat finished in crowded feedlots and lousy with growth hormones, but many hunters also revel in the primitive barbarism of killing for killing’s sake, some even ignoring game limits or hunting seasons set by the state, and it is that particular crowd of not-so-sportsmanlike hunters that the poem’s speaker anticipates. When I interviewed her in March 2021 and inquired about this
poem, Huse Wika explained that “I wrote it as a way to process my anger and grief about the wild animals who lived on the land around my house in Spearfish Canyon being hunted by people from town” (Huse Wika Personal Interview). Many of these hunters, she recalled, exhibited a deeply anthropocentric sense of settler entitlement and (mis)behaved as if the creatures were there solely for their taking. She remembered:

My backyard abutted a tiny piece of land from the Forest Service that was open to archery; there was only one small corner where hunters could legally discharge their weapons, but those rules weren’t followed. There was a tree stand within feet of my backyard. Hunters were baiting the big bucks. Twice I sat with a dying buck in my yard. I would find arrows on my back deck or stuck in my grass or garden. One time, the flock of turkeys was crossing the road to my yard to roost for the night in the pine trees and a truck didn’t even stop—just ran right through the flock, injuring and killing a number of the turkeys. The man stopped, got out of his truck, laughing, and asked me if I’d seen him “smoke those turkeys.” (Huse Wika Personal Interview)

These callous and despicable acts exemplify the almost ubiquitous disregard for nonhuman life in South Dakota by its white, settler-descended inhabitants. In the moment, however, Huse Wika’s speaker doesn’t articulate such harsh judgment against the hunter—at least not yet—for at the close of the poem, she, too, experiences the immediate rupture of the turkeys’ quotidian. The speaker empathizes with the birds’ hasty exit throughout the poem and closes with the lines “But when the birds wing in the silence, / all I can hear is the crack of the bullet” (Perch 30).

An equally compelling, ecocentric element of “Pine for Me” appears after the turkeys flee and the ponderosa pines immediately sense their absence, which we can read as Huse Wika’s speaker’s acknowledgment of the pines’ agency. In the second line, after the “turkeys bullet from
their sleep’’ in the first, the speaker claims that “the pines feel their absence” (Perch 30). And the turkeys’ hasty exodus isn’t the first time the pines have missed the birds; in the penultimate stanza, the speaker notes that “the pines have sympathized / with the fracture of grackle hearts / and the sincerity of nuthatch wings” (Perch 30). While a cynic could simply dismiss these lines as anthropomorphized projection by the speaker, such a waving-away of these crucial lines is itself an anthropocentric, superficial reading. If we think of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism not as a binary opposition or a linear scale, but rather as a Venn diagram with overlap in between, we can locate this speaker’s noticing the pines’ sympathy and longing in that overlap between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric. Therefore, instead of anthropomorphizing and projecting, the speaker instead identifies and acknowledges the pines’ agency, articulating it for her readers. As DiCaglio explains in his reading of Michael Pollan’s The Botany of Desire (2001): “Acknowledging plant agency does not need to undermine our agency. To think this is the case is to imagine that there must be a center to power . . . Instead, to talk about plant agency is to talk about our agency, which is to talk about truly ecological relationships” (460). The speaker, too, as witness to this drama and responding with her own empathy, is part of this particular ecological relationship, and she grants the turkeys and the pines primacy in the poem, not mentioning her own woes until the fourth stanza: “My fickle heart is a red winter apple / that has known at least one bullet” (Perch 30). Here, too, Huse Wika’s speaker shows her deep empathy but privileges nonhuman longing, delaying her own and in turn undermining further the ecological conquerors firing the bullets. When I pressed her about her treatment of trees, birds, and creatures in our interview, she explained that her representations of plant and animal agency are bound up in her own longing:
My work with the flora and fauna of the Hills is really just me writing the home in which
I wish I lived. I do have empathy for the pines; I understand them to be as alive as I am.
Our whole lives play out beneath them, and yet some of us never look up, nor
acknowledge the years they have been there, growing and striving and struggling through
Black Hills winters and summer droughts. Some of them are the oldest creatures we
know. I don’t mean this metaphorically. We literally do not acknowledge their majesty.
Their magic. (Huse Wika Personal Interview)

Nevertheless, in her grappling with these imagined notions of home, the poem certainly suggests
that Huse Wika frequently laments the environmental conquest practiced in the settler state.

The South Dakota landscape, too, appears to exert its agency upon people in several of
Huse Wika’s poems, decentering humans and rattling further the idea that the settler colonists
have conquered it. In “Soapstone,” a recently-published poem about her grandmother which
opens with the lines “My grandmother was cursed / with a too-tender heart that broke at sixty,”
the speaker details her “unhappiness” which manifests as “thorny silence and indifference”
(“Soapstone”).13 The family stands by helpless as this unfolds, and Huse Wika ascribes the
prairie the ability to cause this psychological deterioration in the fourth stanza: “We didn’t hear /
what she couldn’t say / because the prairie stitches women’s mouths shut” (“Soapstone”). Here
Huse Wika’s complex line “the prairie stitches mouths shut” apparently acknowledges the
damage wrought by anthropocentric, patriarchal settler culture on the rural Plains. Huse Wika
explains that the small towns of white, rural America demand such a silence from its women.
Nosy neighbors observe and gossip at the slightest transgression of rigid gender roles or cracking
of stoic, Northern Plains facades. As Huse Wika explains:
If you think about what we talk about in rural farming towns: the weather, the crops, the high school football team . . . In the town paper during my mother’s childhood and my grandmother’s adulthood, they reported the goings-on of neighbors: who bought what car and who installed a new garden and who was getting married when and who had family visiting from out of town. Neighbors knew everything about everybody’s public personas and activities. Yet the silence was deafening when it came to speaking freely about pain, suffering, unhappiness, depression. (Huse Wika Personal Interview)

Here Huse Wika suggests that public life and casual conversation on the rural Plains involves a specific set of rigid rules. In that world, silence is the only appropriate response to subjects that truly matter. In this reading of that line from “Soapstone,” the patriarchal, settler culture upon the prairie does the stitching.

But at the same time, since Huse Wika’s noun “prairie” does the stitching rather than the people upon it in “Soapstone,” we could also read that complicated, rich line in another way. We might interpret it to mean that a tender-hearted person, after decades spent in that lonely, austere land, changes irrevocably and for her grandmother, the accretive effect of time meant less speaking. In this perhaps more literal interpretation, the prairie is the causative agent in this decline. And although this deleterious effect of the prairie might be a grim prospect, I want to point out here that this instance is very different from the victimization by nature that we saw in Badger Clark’s “Prairie Wind.” Huse Wika’s speaker notes the prairie’s power to do this to a person but doesn’t claim that her grandmother was terrorized by it as Clark’s speaker was by the wind; this effect is stated plainly and factually. And in the next two stanzas, we learn of another strand of natural agency in its ability to soothe—if not heal—human beings: “Instead, she spent years staring at the river” (“Soapstone”). Her grandmother exercises her agency by choosing to
stare at the river, its moods, and its nonhuman inhabitants “with her sleeves rolled to her forearms and her and her elbows / on her knees / watching the geese” (“Soapstone”). In exchange for her riveted attention, the river provides years of entertainment and hopefully a degree of restoration.

Nature’s power to restore, too, manifests as a form of agency in Huse Wika’s work, again countering Clark’s settler claims of victimization and Hasselstrom’s indifference and accommodations. In “Catchfly,” the natural world mixes with culture via music and window glass, with the resulting blend offering the speaker, reeling from a soured relationship, refuge in meditative distraction. The poem opens with representations of nature, and then Huse Wika’s speaker deftly weaves in cultural elements via Billie Holiday and windowpanes:

Tonight the flowers will bow their heads
and bare their wilted leaves to the breeze

Billie Holiday’s voice will
finger its ways around dim corners to find me and

between the pulse of fireflies unfurling as primrose,
I will wait for the sky

to break over drought-ridden hills—
for the dark to crack at its edges

Tonight I will listen for the rain to sound

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like rocks tossed at windowpanes. (Perch 23)

Of special note here is the speaker’s use of future tense, with each free verse couplet containing the word “will.” Her deep sense of place allows her to predict what will unfold as evening stretches into nightfall, with nature and culture blending seamlessly into each other and ultimately offering solace, or possibly her longing of what she hopes will happen. As DiCaglio offers in his contemporary corrective to Deep Ecology’s early divisions, problems, and erasures of the human, “recent nature writers are attempting to rearticulate, in a new context, the implications of ecology. That is, they rightfully integrate traditionally human locales and topics more intimately into nature writing” (457). “Catchfly” exemplifies this notion of not only offering a crossing between nature and culture, but of merging the two within the idea of home. Together, this natural-cultural quotidian exerts its quiet agency upon the speaker and offers fleeting solace from that bitter rupture in the speaker’s personal life.

In this case, however, that solace is not quite enough, and the poem then takes a more desperate, Woolfean turn as we see in the final three couplets. Here, too, Huse Wika continues to blend elements of nature and culture as her speaker’s imagined agency emerges:

I will fill my pockets with stones and glass
until I sink into the lakes beneath my windows,

until my fingers brush sand and pebbles
and all of the forgotten at the bottom

But I still will not think
of you. (Perch 23)
Here, even in this dark and difficult moment, the speaker’s agency, which along with the flowers, music, fireflies, and windowpanes, comprise this poem’s complicated ecologies, surges forth and goes to extreme lengths to avoid thinking about that troublesome “you.” But she resists being victimized by it; this Ophelian fantasy, it is crucial to note, is a volitional act. This, too, denotes a departure from Clark’s settler colonial victimization routine and the indifference to nature espoused by Hasselstrom.

A similar melding of the natural and cultural appears in Huse Wika’s poem “In the Beginning,” and through this speaker’s closeness to nature here, too, we can discern its agency via its restorative and destructive power. The speaker emphasizes her closeness to nature in her opening lines: “Move among the days like you wear your red shoes, / but always remain barefooted, bare toes to the ground. / Stretch your fingertips to the rough pine boughs. / Listen for their scent, feel for their breath” (Perch 9). Here we see the speaker’s ecocentric outlook, with the “red shoes” as a necessary accoutrement of quotidian life, representing culture, but in the second line the speaker neatly pivots to address her closeness to nature with the adversative conjunction “but.” The speaker beseeches the reader in imperative voice to maintain that closeness to nature, feeling that bare ground beneath unshod feet, and then using all of our senses to experience the tree’s tree-ness, including its release of oxygen. Huse Wika creates an ecocentric crossing over the nature / culture divide in these opening lines by integrating the red shoes into this intimately natural scene, exemplifying again DiCaglio’s observation that ecocentrism can and should include humans and perhaps their cultural trappings. The red shoes reappear in conjunction with a similarly ecocentric move in her fifth stanza, and here, too, we get a sense of nature’s restorative power and agency, with the shoes and possibly a table as cultural objects included as part of her restorative ecologies: “Find a table in the wilderness under which
to dream / and your mother’s red shoes will take you home / when the fires in the hills threaten to freeze your blood” (*Perch* 9). The table here is ambiguous, suggesting a natural, table-land formation common in the eroded landscapes of the West, and in South Dakota, such tables can be found in the Badlands, the Slim Buttes, and just over the border in Wyoming’s Crook and Weston counties. On the other hand, Huse Wika could mean a human-made table oddly placed in the woods, and picnic tables on Forest Service or National Park Service land aside, such a thing does exist in South Dakota: the infamous Poet’s Table in Custer State Park’s Needles.¹⁴ This ambiguity, too, gestures toward the integration of the cultural into the natural, even in terms of a landform’s being called a *table*. Whatever table we do find to dream under, the speaker asserts, nature can restore us, even if it simultaneously poses a threat, as we see in her speaker’s fear of distant forest fires. And even within that threat, we can discern Huse Wika’s break with settler ecologies; we sense the speaker’s powerlessness over the fires, but her freezing blood is a metaphorical response rather than a settler colonial victimization by it, as Clark might claim, or a proud taking of credit for it as an act of ecological conquest, as we saw in his mini-epic “The Tale of the Hills.”

“You’re Trying to Get Them to Eat Good Food and Take Care of the Prairie”:

Dan O’Brien’s Bison Memoirs and the Undoing of Ecological Conquest

I want to exit that poetic lineage now and close this chapter with another approach to undermining ecological conquest: through memoir-writing which documents good-faith efforts to restore the land back to an approximation of pre-Contact health. In contrast to Linda Hasselstrom’s remembrances of cattle ranching, Dan O’Brien’s nonfiction works, particularly his bison memoirs *Buffalo for the Broken Heart* (2001) and *Wild Idea* (2014), work within a primarily ecocentric ideology in terms of human intervention with and alteration of the
landscape. While Hasselstrom seems to be more interested in mitigating future damage, O’Brien, recognizing the persisting direness of post-Dust Bowl Northern Plains ecology, focuses more upon restoration, which undercuts the hypermasculine West’s anthropocentric fixation upon conquest. O’Brien does not seek to tame the land; instead, he aims to rewild it. His underlying philosophy, as Clinton Mohs explains in “The Cultural Work of Ecological Restoration” (2018), his hearty defense of Broken Heart, is that O’Brien seeks “to create an ecologically-minded approach to extractive practices that have historically been detrimental to local ecosystems” (491). Both Broken Heart and Wild Idea chronicle O’Brien’s project of reintroducing bison to his little corner of the Great Plains and making humanely killed, grass-fed and -finished bison commercially available in South Dakota’s food deserts and beyond. Furthermore, O’Brien, mindful of the Northern Plains’ sordid history after conducting all of the research necessary to write his historical novel The Contract Surgeon (1999), subtly reveals that he attempts to rattle the durable underpinnings of sociopolitical settler colonial conquest by making bison body parts available to the neighboring Lakotas for traditional ceremonies and by hiring Lakota workers at his Wild Idea Buffalo Co. operation in Wild Idea. I do not mean to suggest, however, that his enterprise and his books are sterling examples of undoing conquest, to borrow Veracini’s phrase; O’Brien ultimately carries out these ambitions on the treaty lands of western South Dakota, and while Wild Idea gestures toward O’Brien’s continuing education and ideological evolution in terms of Native American relations and representations, settler colonial language and tropes sully the earlier Broken Heart memoir. In this section, I suggest ways that we could interpret both books as O’Brien’s attempt at enacting a corrective to historical mistakes and ecological injustices, and I gesture toward the representational troubles that emerge in his attempts to chronicle his project.
In terms of his enterprise’s overarching goals of producing healthy meat, O’Brien’s bison ranching project appears to have very respectable aims and so we might read both ranching memoirs in a positive light, in terms of Native allyship, making properly-raised and harvested bison available to everyone, and grasslands restoration. O’Brien wants nothing more than to restore his little piece of the Great Plains to pre-Dust Bowl, pre-cattle boom condition, and to produce bison that is, as the Wild Idea Buffalo Co.’s website proudly proclaims:

- 100% Grass-Fed/Grass-Finished [no feedlots]
- 100% Antibiotic and Hormone Free
- 100% GMO Free
- 100% Humanely Field Harvested [which means that these bison don’t endure the horrors of slaughterhouses like many other commercial bison producers’ animals do] (Wild Idea Buffalo Co.)

These are lofty aims, and as both books, particularly Wild Idea, make clear, O’Brien succeeds in achieving them. Early in Wild Idea, O’Brien explains his project in sum, outlines what sets his eco-approach apart, and takes a subtle swipe at bison ranchers who finish their bison in feedlots in this recollection:

As ranchers of all stripes were trying to build buffalo herds and giving little thought to selling meat, only a few food people were extolling the virtues of buffalo meat as a delicious, healthy, and sustainable source of protein. Jill [his wife], of course, was one of the people who knew early on that buffalo meat, when raised free of feedlots, hormones, antibiotics, and stress, was perhaps the best tasting and healthiest red meat in the world. (30)
Jill, a foodie and chef, is well aware of how healthy bison can be sans contemporary, corporate tampering, and while he wholeheartedly approves of these benefits, O’Brien presses further and notes in the latter part of this paragraph that his interest also includes rehabilitating the Great Plains ecosystem. He continues: “On the other hand, I was sure that because the buffalo had co-evolved with all the other prairie plants and animals that had been misused to the point of near extinction, they were a management key for bringing back all that had made the Great Plains ecosystem thrive” (30). Here we see that his ambitions stretch beyond the anthropocentric and towards a biocentric, Leopoldian land ethic; as a former biologist, O’Brien believes that bringing back bison, one of the Plains’ keystone species, will help the prairie recover from the grave and repeated insults of plowing, overgrazing, and other abuses wrought by extractive, settler colonial, capitalistic endeavors.

And just to underscore the importance of O’Brien’s project and summarize it a bit more succinctly, O’Brien’s hired hand and best friend, an endearingly crusty, fly-tying wit named Erney, throws O’Brien’s project into beautifully stark, clear Western American relief near the end of *Wild Idea* in a moment where we see him listening to O’Brien in a moment of despair about finances. He attempts to buck up his friend’s spirits by reassuring him: “Come on, Dan’l, you’re not waterboarding people,” and then he delivers this summation: “You’re trying to get them to eat good food and take care of the prairie” (261). Erney’s simple statement points to just how commendable O’Brien’s undertaking is—or could be.

The latter half of Erney’s statement in which he acknowledges O’Brien’s goal of taking “care of the prairie,” points to O’Brien’s efforts in terms of Native allyship and the undoing of conquest, and also suggest that O’Brien’s project undercuts hypermasculine notions of taming the West. One of the harsh realities pushing back against the expansionist boosters’ preposterous
fiction of rain following the plow was the prospect of soil erosion, an unholy horror to settlers. Hannah Holleman points out the relationship between erosion and expansion in *Dust Bowls of Empire* (2018), noting that “Before Anglo-European colonization of North America, English and European writers expressed concern for soil erosion. Settler colonists carried knowledge of this problem to the ‘new world’” and their cultivation practices “degraded the land and created Dust Bowl-like conditions of soil erosion, encouraging a continual westward movement to cultivate new lands” (81). These rape-and-pillage cultivation practices thus necessitated a continual, westward march after farms became untenable, inextricably linking settler colonialism to ecological degradation. Moreover, western South Dakota, while not the epicenter of dust storms in the 1930s, certainly suffered significant damage from overgrazing, particularly during the cattle boom period in the 1880s, as well as the doomed cultivation efforts culminating in the so-called Great Plow Up of the early twentieth century. For a bit of context and so that we better understand the history and state of the land inherited by O’Brien, I turn to Richard White’s recounting of the dire conditions resulting from the catastrophic mix of Northern Plains weather and overgrazing in the late 1880s in *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (1991). According to White, after the exceptionally fierce winter of 1885-86, in which untold numbers of cattle froze to death on the already overgrazed Southern Plains of Oklahoma, Kansas, and the Texas Panhandle, the overgrazing crisis spread north:

> The next year disaster struck the northern plains. There, too, overgrazing had seriously reduced the ability of the land to feed cattle. In some areas where 5 acres had sufficed to feed a steer, it now took more than 90. The summer of 1886 was dry and hot. This weather not only retarded the growth of the already overgrazed grasses, but it also forced
cattle to congregate around remaining water sources. The lands around these creeks and waterholes were so heavily trampled that nothing grew on them. (224)

The range eventually became so devastated that the federal government reclaimed three swathes of land and designated them as National Grasslands in the 1940s in a New Deal effort at rehabilitation: the 116,000-acre Ft. Pierre National Grasslands, near the Bad and Missouri Rivers in Stanley County, and the two-unit, 160,000-acre Buffalo Gap National Grassland, near Wall and Hot Springs.

And even well after the Dust Bowl and into the mid- and later twentieth century, ecological conquest persisted by way of still-deleterious ranching and farming practices and ideologies on the Northern Plains. After its emergency interventions such as teaching farmers about contour plowing during the Dust Bowl, the U.S. government remained firmly entrenched in agricultural production. Yet cattle and wheat don’t really belong there, as O’Brien likes to point out, and he fully displays his horror of the farm subsidies that fund these completely unsustainable agricultural practices in both books, particularly in Broken Heart. In that text, O’Brien, sensitive to grasslands ecology from his time as a biologist and falconer, swerves away from cattle ranching, that proud and storied trade mired in Western American myths of justified conquest, and to bison ranching instead, an undoing of conquest that I discuss shortly. But most ranchers in western South Dakota, faced by this dilemma of money and diminishing grasses, remain oblivious to the environmental consequences of cattle ranching, and so they continue on with what does not work, and if money allows, they do it even harder. O’Brien points to their stubbornness and durable ideologies by contrasting himself and Erney against these hard-bitten, South Dakota ranchers, several of whom happen to be his neighbors:
Though western South Dakotans can be a surprisingly tolerant bunch, there is something in the way Erney and I live that offends some. For them this land is a sort of factory and it should produce wheat and beef. The idea of enjoying the natural features of the country, minimizing human impact on the land, and deviating from the way people have traditionally lived out here simply does not compute. (*Broken Heart* 115)

The greed and stubbornness which underpinned the cattle boom of the late 19th century and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s continues to this day, according to O’Brien, and the other ranchers’ view, he charges, is that land is meant to be subjugated, conquered, and abused.

The Northern Plains, in short, is trashed, and O’Brien inherits and attempts to undo these sorry ecological conditions wrought by the ravages of conquest. Before we consider O’Brien’s representations of his restoration work in terms of both grasslands and the role of its keystone species, bison, I want to point to two lovely and crucial passages about the value of grass in his lesser-known memoir about falconry, *Equinox* (2010), for both historical and contemporary contexts. O’Brien underscores the importance of grasses to this landscape in both passages and in the first, he points out that although the Dust Bowl has ended—for now—enormous ecological problems persist on the Plains, despite everything, human life and their fragile economies included, being completely contingent on the health of the grasses:

> On the Great Plains, grass is everything. Everything that creeps or crawls or flies or drives a pickup owes its existence to grass. The health of that existence depends on the health of the grass and most of the grass on the Great Plains is not that healthy. Our ranch and a few ranches that neighbor us form a small island in an ocean of generally devastated land. (24)
In this passage, O’Brien points out the bitter irony of unhealthy, yet all-important grasslands, and the subtext here is that most creatures and humans in the region, with the exception of O’Brien and his environmentally aware neighbors, do not lead a healthy existence because the land is in such rough shape. In another important, meditative passage in this section of *Equinox*, O’Brien explains how the land became that way; overgrazing, the primary culprit of grassland degradation in western South Dakota, nearly caused the demise of native grasses, and what is more, he asserts that the newly-landed, white settlers of the Northern Plains were simply clueless rather than engaged in a get-rich-quick, aspiring cattle baron scheme. He writes:

> Now little bluestem, western wheat grass, and grama grass are coming back into the areas where cattle—because they like the taste of it—brought it to the edge of extinction . . .

> Many think the major product of the Great Plains is beef, but it’s not. The major product of the Great Plains is grass . . . The grass on the Great Plains has been abused for a century—not so much by greed as by ignorance. (24)

Here, too, O’Brien emphasizes the value of grasses to this ecosystem, and we also get a sense of his ranching predecessors’ aims in this passage. These grasslands, only host to white settlement for just a few generations, are damaged to such a devastating degree that the prospect of rehabilitation, while still possible, becomes an enormous undertaking.

Bison, as I will show, do much of the restoration work for O’Brien, but the grassland is so far gone that it needs even more help than its keystone species can provide, and although he does not mention it in *Broken Heart*, O’Brien does write briefly of replanting grasses in *Wild Idea*. This act of restoring native grasses, even without the bison, is an undoing of conquest and of anthropocentric, Western hypermasculinity. He made some early errors by not researching native grasses deeply enough at first, but in his defense, he was operating without a blueprint, for
not many people or government agencies have even attempted to restore a Northern Plains grassland. He notes early in *Wild Idea* that “Many mistakes were made as the result of my own failings, but also because the science of grassland protection and restoration is not well understood . . . I got off to a poor start by planting trees and hybrid grasses that were supposed to grow in a harsh, dry land” (6). Yet these trees and grasses did not survive because they were not native to the Northern Plains. This early effort, however, was not a waste, because they lead him to a minor epiphany: “Native birds and animals need the native plants that they evolved with—the nutritious, hardy, deep-rooted perennials that have been nearly extirpated over the last century” (6-7). O’Brien takes a swipe at the twin pillars of ecological conquest, cattle ranching and overgrazing, in this articulation of his grass restoration realization. I call this moment a minor epiphany because O’Brien certainly understates his later replanting efforts in the book; bison, after all, are the primary focus of *Wild Idea*, with family running a very close second, as the memoir’s subtitle *Buffalo and Family in a Difficult Land* suggests. He downplays the crucial information that he has sown native grass seeds on his new place, the Cheyenne River Ranch, which borders Pine Ridge, the Badlands, and Buffalo Gap National Grassland, mentioning it only twice: first and merely in passing, in his description of bison-watching’s mesmerizing effect, where he snaps back to reality with the line “But nursing an appreciation for buffalo doesn’t pay the bills, let alone the costs of restoration like the planting of native grasses or the resting of pastures needed to regain land health” and second, in slightly more detail, in his recollection about his decision to involve an outside investor (17). This second mention occurs much later in the book when Vin, the investor and venture capitalist visits the ranch. O’Brien, having had that earlier, minor epiphany, casually announces to readers that has gotten his replanting act together by then: “We stepped out of the ATV and I showed Vin the hair-like
seedlings of western wheatgrass, green needle, little bluestem, sideoats grama, prairie clover, and purple coneflower. They were expensive native species that we had planted, and they were pitifully small and fragile” (203). His casual treatment of this important detail—and what was surely a great deal of labor—masks an enormous, crucial point: that while bison are clearly his main passion and focus, each piece of hard-won knowledge regarding the ecological restoration of his little corner of Northern Plains grasslands, and each aspect of the act of restoring it, are crucial to returning the land to a state resembling that which precludes the arrival of white settlers in the 19th century. O’Brien’s agrostological restoration efforts and his representations of them in his bison memoirs, therefore, successfully work to undo conquest.

Similarly, O’Brien’s reintroduction of bison to his ranches works to undo settler conquest, in the dual contexts of restoring the land and restoring the species itself. The native grasses that he attempts to coax back to life in both books and went so far as to replant on the Cheyenne River Ranch, he explains, require bison hooves to truly flourish. O’Brien frequently uses various forms of the verb massage in both books to emphasize the interdependent relationship between bison and grasslands, and to illustrate how bison help aerate and subtly turn the soil. In Broken Heart, he explains:

It’s called hoof action and is an essential part of the prairie ecosystem. Cattle’s hooves seem somehow to impact the land differently. Of course that makes sense, since our grass evolved to thrive under buffalo hooves, not cattle hooves. Only buffalo are a force that can match the scale of this land. Only buffalo have to power to massage this land back to health. (166)

Though this land can never again be as it was prior to white settlement, O’Brien insists that it can be restored to a reasonably well-balanced and similar facsimile. The effects of bison upon the
land, he claims, are profound; in the first chapter of *Wild Idea*, for instance, he fondly recalls his original 12 bison on the Broken Heart Ranch and remembered, even in those early days, that “The beleaguered grasses responded favorably to the massaging of buffalo hooves and everything on the ranch, from the smallest sedges to the people, seemed to strengthen” (7).

O’Brien implies here that bison, the Great Plains’ keystone species, were the missing piece of the puzzle in his restoration aims, and now that he has reintroduced them, all species not wiped out by the ravages of settler colonialism might begin to flourish once again.

Yet an undoing of solely ecological conquest aside, O’Brien’s representations of his buffalo reintroduction project raise numerous issues in terms of Native representation and the allyship that we saw emerge (eventually) in his fiction, pitting his historical caricatures and potential cultural appropriation against his good intentions, hiring of Lakota workers, and his distribution of bison body parts to the Lakota people for traditional and ceremonial purposes.

The fact that he has reintroduced bison *at all*, on one hand, stands as a commendable undercutting of the United States’ settler colonial project. After the Civil War, the U.S. immediately moved into the Plains Wars, aiming to subdue Native Americans. One of their genocidal strategies was to also decimate the bison population. According to Holleman:

> As a far more advanced killing machine and with seasoned troops, the Army began the slaughter of people, buffalo, and the land itself. The connection between destroying ecosystems and societies was encapsulated by the U.S军事’s indirect and direct actions to annihilate the buffalo in order to deprive Native Americans of both sustenance and culture. In charge of the Department of Missouri from 1869 to 1870, Lt. Gen. John M. Schofield wrote succinctly of his aims: “I wanted no other occupation in life than to
ward off the savage and kill off his food until there should no longer be an Indian frontier in our beautiful country.” (67)

O’Brien, as an ecologist, biologist, bison rancher, and creative biographer of Valentine T. McGillycuddy, knows this brutal, gruesome history all too well. When he acquires that initial group of orphaned bison in Broken Heart, he writes with palpable reverence that “Just on the other side of that shed stood the first thirteen buffalo to stand on this ground for a hundred and thirty years” (46). Here, too, we see an undoing of ecological conquest, but at the same time, this momentous occasion becomes complicated by the fact that it took a white savior to accomplish it. O’Brien creates this brilliant moment in the history of the Broken Heart ranch via the spoils of settler colonialism, and such a moment is unavailable to most Lakotas. But at the same time, O’Brien’s Lakota neighbor Stan Holsclaw appreciates O’Brien’s efforts with bison, telling him, “It feels good to have them on us . . . Even if they belong to a white man” (121). Stan ribs O’Brien good-naturedly here but his statement brims with bitter irony.

Furthermore, O’Brien frequently historicizes bison meat in Broken Heart with mixed results in terms of successfully establishing Native allyship and undoing conquest. This refrain first appears early in the book, when O’Brien acquires the little herd of orphaned bison and his focus shifts from cattle to bison ranching. He proclaims, “Raised properly and prepared right, it [bison meat] has no rival. It is not some artificially grown red meat. It was the food of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud” (37). Variations on this phrase crop up perpetually for the rest of the text, fixating upon these lionized Lakota leaders of the Plains wars and their hallowed food. While Broken Heart, O’Brien’s best-known book, has not garnered a sizeable body of criticism, the two essays that address it both take issue with O’Brien’s pattern of historicizing Lakota food, albeit in wildly contrasting ways. Clinton Mohs, in his most pointed complaint
about *Broken Heart* in his otherwise admiring essay, explains this pattern with his assertion that O’Brien does not fully acknowledge the ramifications of the Plains Wars nor its settler colonial aftermaths:

This trend notably occurs in his discussion of the buffalo’s history on the Great Plains, wherein O’Brien relates Custer’s expedition into the Black Hills—an event that would ultimately precipitate the acceleration of the Plains Wars. This moment in the text signals an awareness of the Northern Plains as a contested space, but it defers any serious engagement with that history. (502)

O’Brien, as I show in my discussion of the Plains Wars’s immediate repercussions in *The Contract Surgeon* and *The Indian Agent* in my chapter about his fiction, as well as my argument that he undoes conquest by restoring grasslands, knows the history of these Lakota leaders, particularly Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, extremely well. For readers of *Broken Heart* who have not read O’Brien’s historical fiction, however, it is entirely possible that these moments of historical name-dropping do not satisfy a hunger for a more detailed history lesson. But O’Brien *does* engage with that history in a broader context, particularly in the first two paragraphs of chapter nine, in which he sets up and subsequently explodes the Western American myth by announcing that the frontier is “also a place that does not exist and never has,” and he goes on to accuse pioneers of “cheating the Indians out of their birthright and culture” (95-6). While interesting, Mohs’ toothless complaint does not hold that much water.

essay’s introduction, which is helpful, but he goes on to makes the curious argument that O’Brien twists and colonizes these archetypes to construct his New Western masculinity (385). Bayers gripes:

A rebirth of white western masculinity as O’Brien imagines it is deeply reliant on his identification with famous Native heroes who occupy a mythic status in the national imaginary. In other words, O’Brien is an example of what Shari M. Huhndorf calls white men “going Native,” or to borrow from Philip Deloria, “playing Indian,” in order to serve his own ideological purposes. (386)

Here Bayers seems to overlook that the beating heart of O’Brien’s primary ideology, as readers of both Broken Heart and Wild Idea know, involves biocentric, ecological restoration, which in turn undercuts the dominant, hypermasculine ideologies of the Old and New Wests. While both Mohs’ and Bayers’ essays make interesting arguments, both critics overlook the problem of O’Brien’s relegating the Lakotas to the past, at least in Broken Heart.

To borrow Bayers’ phrase, O’Brien’s “mythological archetypes” of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud, in tandem with O’Brien’s avoidance of contemporary Native America and its issues in Broken Heart, effectively vanishes the Lakota people. Though he’s obsessed with rehabilitating the grasslands and often refers to Western American mythology and history—going so far as to occasionally use the word conquest during his meditative critiques—with the exception of his neighboring rancher Stan Holsclaw, O’Brien rarely takes up the current state of Lakota affairs and struggles, thus exemplifying Jodi Byrd’s assertion that “American Indians (and all other indigenous peoples) are too often relegated to sites of ‘already-doneness’” (Byrd). His valorizing, heavy-handed refrain about archetypal food throughout the text makes this omission even more glaring. And while O’Brien’s recounting of Stan’s son’s tragic suicide
conveys great sympathy and he supports his friend as best he can, O’Brien misses the opportunity to continue the promising work he began with his fictional character Tuffy in *In the Center of the Nation* and comment upon issues of alcoholism and despair among Native Americans. Instead, the narratological pattern continues to laud the hallowed food of the archetypal Lakota warriors, on repeat until the book’s close, resulting in this disconcerting imbalance. We do, however, get a much better sense of O’Brien’s relationships with Native people and the ways in which he works to undo conquest through his representations in *Wild Idea*. The repeating pattern vanishes rather than the Lakotas in this book, and they begin to appear in chapter three with Rocke Afraid of Hawk and persist until the book’s close as people rather than stereo- or archetypes: fully-realized, multidimensional, nonfiction representations.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have identified and problematized the relationship of settler colonialism to anthropocentrism in South Dakota literature by surveying the work of four of the state’s most devoted nature writers. Ecological conquest, of course, is an enormous, global issue not limited to the confines of our border; as Eileen Krist and Helen Kopnina explain in “Unsettling Anthropocentrism,” “We live in a world in which a series of civilizations, empires, and societies have destroyed forests, plowed grasslands under, drained wetlands, dewatered, diverted, and controlled rivers, dominated lakes and (more recently) seas, and overall roundly used nature for material ends” (388). But in a settler state such as South Dakota, the circumstances are slightly different since rather than a pillage-and-flee approach practiced first in colonized nations by the English, French, Belgians, and others, and now by multinational corporations, settlers “come to stay” as Patrick Wolfe reminds us (2). The responsibility of undoing ecological conquest, then, falls not only to indigenous people but also to the descendants of settlers, who, if they are going
to indeed stay, must bear their fair share of responsibility for ecosystemic health and rehabilitation. Huse Wika and O’Brien, as I have shown, both capture their respective efforts representationally, offering not only their present day responses to Northern Plains environmental problems, but also by disrupting the valorization of settlers, their destructive practices, and their hypermasculine ideals, which Clark and Hasselstrom so heartily espouse. But perhaps, these writers might also provide inspiration for future generations, who will be forced to contend with the mounting ecological messes left by the initial as well as the continuing waves of Western American expansionism.
Endnotes

1 See Mitchell’s *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* for his smart, extensive discussion of the ramifications of toughness, silence, misogyny, and more in Westerns novels and movies.

2 A lone exception to Clark’s pattern of anthropocentric insertions is his work “Quaking Asp.” This poem contains no human witnesses barging into the scene, yet the speaker still anthropomorphizes aspen trees: “Quaking Asp, the giddy miss / Gives her life for worse or better / To the Breeze, that casual petter, / And forever courts his kiss” (*Sky Lines* 46).

3 For a bit of context, this victimization by nature is a fairly standard move in early Great Plains literature, which teems with countless examples of nature portrayed as an oppressor, and South Dakota literature is no exception. Quantic offers Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Dakota novels as evidence of this trend: “A blizzard often symbolizes nature’s malevolence. In *The Long Winter*, Wilder recounts the Ingallses’ life during a winter of endless blizzards on the Dakota frontier” (52). Quantic points to the Ingalls family having to twist kindling from hay and grind wheat with Ma’s coffee grinder to suggest that nature victimizes the family. Clark’s “Prairie Wind” poem operates with a similar logic of ecological victimization, absent, of course, the desperately-twisted haysticks.

4 Clark’s fellow writer Camille Yuill, a Deadwood author and journalist, wrote the “byline” commentary in “Boots and Bylines.” Her contextualization of “You’re Hog-Tied, Old Cheyenne,” explains that “For the dedication near Hot Springs on October 17, 1932, of a bridge across the mighty meandering Cheyenne on its way to join the powerful Missouri River, he wrote in glowing terms” (35).

5 I want to briefly remark on my potentially unusual theoretical approach to this section. As a habit and as a hobby, I continually worry about the settler colonial circumstances and implications of white writers engaging and enacting placemaking strategies on unceded treaty land in the West and particularly in South Dakota. For several years, I believed that settler colonialism is so durable that this troubling line of inquiry was a dead end, a conversation-stopper that led to despair rather than substantive reading strategies. This line of inquiry serves as my research question for Hasselstrom’s work, since here we have a seemingly well-meaning, white writer with settler colonial blind spots enacting placemaking strategies on what ultimately amounts to land stolen from the Lakota people, and when I began to read Hasselstrom’s books, I was unsure of how to coherently theorize them.

I eventually realized, however, I had already learned a viable—if slightly strange—avenue of possible theorization for such a frustrating research question in my first-ever graduate seminar, taught by Nancy Cook at the University of Montana. In that course, we approached a dizzying array of Western American books through a seemingly curious pairing of affect theory with Everyday Studies and Place Studies, which she outlines in detail in her pedagogical essay “Quotidian Wests.” As her former student in that experimental, formidable seminar, I want to steer Cook’s theoretical underpinnings in a slightly different direction and in an attempt to answer my query about settler placemaking, consider how place and the quotidian engage with
settler colonialism in Hasselstrom’s work. And although I pick on Hasselstrom in this section, she is far from alone and in very good company in her evocations of place on stolen land; Western Americanists could approach countless other place-based texts, including works by Wallace Stegner, James Galvin, Richard Hugo, and other luminaries with this difficult but crucial line of inquiry of settler colonial placemaking.

6 Hasselstrom’s second husband and co-star of Windbreak, George Snell, passed away from a tumor caused by radiation used to treat his Hodgkins disease in 1988. The “empty chair” in the final line of the poem is probably his.

7 While Highmore explains his notion of drift as subjective and multivalent, he offers a general explanation in his chapter “Everyday Aesthetics,” as “the picking up and letting go of concentration,” which in turn “works to point to the strange character of routine, humdrum life” (44).

8 James Welch (1940-2003) was a prominent Montana poet, novelist, and nonfiction writer whose works include Winter in the Blood, Killing Custer, and Fools Crow. When Welch was Richard Hugo’s student at the University of Montana’s (in)famous creative writing MFA program, he submitted a poem called “In My First Hard Springtime” and according to Montana critic Bill Bevis, “Hugo said that when he came to [the third line] ‘Albert Heavy Runner was never civic’ he knew he had nothing to teach this young man except to tell him to keep writing” (117). Welch certainly did, collecting such prizes as the Western Literature Association’s Distinguished Achievement Award in 1994, the American Book Award in 1986, the Montana Governor’s Humanities Award, and the John Dos Passos Award for Literature in 1994, to name a few of his many achievements.

9 See Veracini’s second chapter, “Settlers Are Not Migrants” for a spirited argument against conflating the two. The primary distinction, as I understand it, is that settlers conquer and move, while migrants simply move, but there are other forces at play, including volitionality and enabling or neutralizing by policy.

10 To hearken back to my discussion of authenticity in my “As Long As the Story Gets Told” chapter, here we see a sparkling example of Western American literature’s stubborn reliance upon the authentic. Huse Wika casually infers here that Hasselstrom’s authentic settings have inherent value, more, perhaps, than imagined settings written by outsiders. But in the spirit of generous argumentation, I want to give her the benefit of the doubt here and accept her assertion in her dissertation’s artist statement that as a fledgling South Dakota writer struggling with the notion that she needed to flee to the city to make it as a writer, Huse Wika deeply appreciated these other writers’ gritty representations of South Dakota since they demonstrated to her that South Dakota is, in fact, a worthy subject.

11 Huse Wika named the poem for the American mourning dove’s specific epithet, Zenaida macroura.

12 In South Dakota, where the burgeoning trend of bridges and tunnels for animals known as “wildlife crossings” has not yet caught on, it is not uncommon to spot scores of dead birds and
animals lining its two interstates, state highways, and even the streets of its cities and towns. The general attitude toward fallen creatures seems to indicate a definite callousness toward nonhuman life. In fact, in 2020, the state’s attorney general Jason Ravnsborg ran over a man near Highmore, killing him and shrugging off the vehicular homicide with the defense that he thought he had hit a deer.

13 No page number is available; “Soapstone” was published in the spring of 2020 in the journal *Calyx*, which does not use them.

14 The Poet’s Table is a landmark in Custer State Park that was placed in the 1960s by local poet and wanderer John Raeck. For decades, the table and the cabinets containing notebooks with Table visitors’ musings and drawings, candles, writing utensils, nearly empty liquor bottles, cigarettes, roached joints, memory boxes containing loved ones’ ashes, and other cultural artifacts were a local secret, and in keeping with that dying tradition, I will not disclose its specific location here. That said, with the rise of social media, traffic to the Poet’s Table has increased dramatically and the site has become an eyesore, complete with graffiti spray-painted onto the granite overhang which looms above it. In 2018, the original Poet’s Table was stolen and destroyed by two locals who felt it was becoming too popular and thus destroying the surrounding area, and a well-meaning carpenter built a new table and laboriously hauled it to the original site a few weeks later. The bitter irony of its theft is that having made the local news for several weeks, the Poet’s Table is now more popular than ever; the path to it, once barely discernable, is now an unmissable, heavily eroded trail.

15 Veracini, as I explain in more depth in my Lakota allyship chapter about O’Brien’s fiction, believes that physical decolonization in a settler situation would be very difficult because it would result in “further displacement” but does argue that “decolonisation should lie in undoing conquest” (103).
Conclusion:

Toward a Decolonial South Dakota

If, as I argue in my introduction, South Dakota’s literary canon helps to maintain the settler colonial structure in the state’s cultural imaginary, the texts I address in this dissertation collectively suggest that this settler structure and the canon which helps to maintain it are not only unsustainable but deeply unstable. While it might be hard to imagine, amid the political turmoil and widespread, anti-intellectual sentiment of the early twenty-first century, that books might be able to help usher us out of the immensely complex, sociopolitical and legal conundrum of settler colonialism, the noncanonical works I interpret collectively show that a shift in the settler colonial mindset is indeed possible. In this study, I found that the texts in the preceding chapters speak to one another in productive ways, painting a more complete picture of the implications of calling South Dakota home—even in the twenty-first century—than we might gather from reading canonical South Dakotan works such as those by Wilder, Rolvaag, or Clark. When we read Micheaux, for example, and note those instances of representational anxiety about settlement and ownership of treaty lands, the utter lack of such moments in the South Dakota canon becomes even more glaring. South Dakota’s canonical writers, by and large, exude a Manifest Destiny-enabled sense of entitlement when it comes to the subject of settlement as I point out in my introduction and in my discussion of Clark’s poetry in my fourth chapter. Micheaux, however, shows us the complex psychological toll of settlement in South Dakota for arrivant colonists, while both O’Brien’s and Brave Bird’s nonfiction and Huse Wika’s poetry demonstrates the difficulties of negotiating the aftermath of that initial, late 19th century period of settlement and its genocidal and ecological brutalities.
In addition, the texts I address in this dissertation undercut the notion of South Dakota and its literature as a genre dominated by monolithically white conquerors. Micheaux’s homesteading novels provide an invaluable perspective and underscore the racism his protagonists face as they negotiate that knife edge to survive and succeed in Jim Crow-era Gregory County, while Brave Bird’s books—mediated though they may be—explode multiple stereotypes of Native people and offer a Lakota view of why generations of Native activists continue to resist. Both voices are crucial to understanding South Dakota’s history and culture and could potentially enable the case for the undoing of conquest. As John Lowe writes in his forward to the collection *Multiethnic Literature and Canon Debates*, “Understanding our cultural diversity as an essential nutrient of democratic society can only lead to a better sense of cultural richness and proud, but tolerant democratic solidarity” (Bona and Maini viii). When Brave Bird, for instance, explains in *Ohitika Woman* that “In 1868 we made the famous Treaty of Fort Laramie, with the government still promising us the vast plains known as the Great Sioux Reservation. It was broken before the ink was dry,” she offers readers a perspective that they may not have previously considered, one which includes the immense historical injustices that occurred in South Dakota (223).

The works of write writers I examine in this dissertation, too, facilitate a deeper understanding of our difficult history and its literary representations than those offered by the South Dakota canon. O’Brien’s bumpy road to Native allyship in his fiction becomes even more important when we read Micheaux and note not only Micheaux’s anxieties but also his protagonists’ attempts to hide them, particularly his flippant, anti-Native remarks. Through these remarks, we get a sense of then-prevalent, Wilder-esque attitudes toward the Lakotas, which are still detectable in O’Brien’s *Spirit in the Hills*. But in his later novels, O’Brien shows us that it is
possible to produce more responsible and nuanced work—the flipside of Dances with Wolves-escape cultural appropriation, perhaps—and suggests that undoing conquest is possible, even in South Dakota. Similarly, Huse Wika’s poems, too, work to undo conquest, via her stewardship of the land and her rebuttal of Badger Clark’s settler poetics with her embrace of ecocentricity.

Yet, as I discovered throughout this project, these literary works also show the complexities of decolonizing the canon, in that there is no easy and tidy path to undoing conquest. None of these texts offer a perfect road map to casting out settler ideology once and for all; instead, they point to the inherent starts, stops, and utter messiness of attempting to contend with settler colonialism and its legacy. As a disclaimer, since I have already devoted a chapter to defending Mary Brave Bird’s texts against unwarranted charges of inauthenticity, selling out, and other authorial crimes levied by a disgusted mob of Native and non-Native detractors, I will not add to that already lengthy list of their mostly unfounded complaints here. In my third chapter, I ultimately asserted that Brave Bird’s books do, in fact, have great literary value in that they encourage readers to actively and epistemologically engage with history, and so I wish to therefore exempt her from further critique and simply note that the fact that her books sparked such a heated debate and required such a multifaceted defense at all exemplifies settler colonialism’s oppression and durability.

As for the non-Native authors in this dissertation, I want to first point to the contradictions of Oscar Micheaux, my early twentieth century example, who is lured West by its intoxicating promise of economic success, but despite his best efforts, is excluded from settler society and cannot truly succeed—he cannot become a founding father of the town, he cannot marry outside of his race, and he must not transgress societal mores. Yet despite their being denied acceptance, Micheaux and his alter egos attempt to remain on unceded treaty land and
continue to take advantage of the Dawes Act, and all of his representational anxieties cannot erase this fact. These anxieties do, however, suggest that he feels obligated to enact his performative colonizing in order to negotiate that knife’s edge so that he may simply exist there in a relative degree of safety in his fruitless attempt to create a space for himself in post-Dawes Gregory County. As I point out in my conclusion of chapter one, readers may come away from his first book, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*, with the eerie sense that the title is somewhat ironic, and that Micheaux—rather than the land and its Native inhabitants—has been conquered.

Dan O’Brien, for his part, made several, early missteps in Native representation and still, even late into his gradual turn toward an allyship with the Lakotas, continues to make some problematic authorial decisions. When I speculate that his exclusion of Native people in *Brendan Prairie* is necessary “white-man business,” to borrow his character Agnes’ important line in his earlier book *In the Center of the Nation*, I suggest that O’Brien is, at that point in his career, possibly coming to terms with the settler colonial occupation of the Lakotas’ sacred Black Hills (181). And while that explanation is certainly a possibility, the lack of Native characters in that book remains an enigma. Moreover, despite O’Brien’s important, historical biographies of Valentine McGillycuddy, *The Contract Surgeon* and *The Indian Agent*—which feature Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, respectively—that were published prior to *Stolen Horses*, his last and latest work of fiction, O’Brien still kills off Tad Bordeaux, his only substantive Native character in that latter text. While I offer the argument that doing so is a way for him to get at the issue of Native health care and its serious shortcomings, my assertion is in no way a defense of his questionable decision. And finally, in his bison memoirs that I interpret in chapter four, O’Brien’s well-meaning gestures are occasionally marred by potential cultural appropriation,
particularly in *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*. While he insists that his Lakota friend and employee Stan Holsclaw shoot the bison, for instance, O’Brien himself smudges them with sage. While we could make the Libertarian-esque argument that O’Brien is on his land and those are his bison and that is his sage and therefore, he can do whatever he wants out there, offering that ad hoc ceremony to the world in print connotes an additional responsibility of cultural sensitivity. But instead of asking Stan to perform the smudging, O’Brien does it and proudly documents it in the text, which—like some of his dubious, authorial decisions in his fiction—indicates that he struggles with formulating an appropriate response to settler colonialism and does occasionally misstep.

Huse Wika’s poems, too, show her working through settler colonialism in her representations of nature on stolen land. Though she quietly unsettles the Badger Clarkean tradition of hypermasculine, anthropocentric representations of conquering the virgin wilderness, Huse Wika does not address these glaring concerns of contested land overtly—not even notions of home, which is one of her chief thematic concerns. But to her credit, Huse Wika is painfully aware of and very opinionated about settler colonial issues in Western American nature writing; in my interview with her, when I asked “How do we reconcile place-making or even the idea of home in the western U.S. and especially here in South Dakota, where we are on unceded treaty land?” she responded,

We shouldn’t reconcile it. We can’t. All of these South Dakota narratives from “real” SoDakians—these long family histories of working the land and these claims to South Dakota—are revisionist history and dangerous when not followed by the acknowledgement that the only original South Dakota families are Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota. (Huse Wika Personal Interview)

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Yet in its more sorrowful moments, her work occasionally suggests the possibility of settler colonialism as a permanent, foregone conclusion, and in that light, her lovely moments of tender-hearted animal rescue could be read as an exhausted cleanup crew forever picking up after entitled descendants of white settlers.

Despite their occasional messiness and contradictions, I found that these decolonial works by Micheaux, O’Brien, Brave Bird, and Huse Wika all chip away at the settler colonial structure and the frontier narrative in their respective ways, showing that settler colonialism, though not (yet) finished as Lorenzo Veracini reminds us, is not entirely infallible. These books are a crucial piece of the decolonization puzzle in South Dakota and collectively complement other, more direct decolonial movements in the state. I want to turn now to a brief consideration of two of these adjacent movements that work against settler colonial maintenance: one in the realm of politics, and the other in education, to underscore literature’s important—though perhaps more indirect—role.

**LandBack and Political Resistance**

On July 3, 2020, on the heels of the George Floyd protests that had rocked Minneapolis and other major U.S. cities, over 100 Lakota activists—calling themselves land defenders—and their allies converged on Keystone, South Dakota, to protest an Independence Day rally scheduled for that evening at nearby Mount Rushmore. The celebration would feature speeches by Governor Kristi Noem, then-Vice President Mike Pence, and then-President Donald J. Trump, as well as fireworks and flyovers of military aircraft. The rally was controversial on several fronts; packing un-socially-distanced attendees into the stands during a global pandemic was one reason why, and the “America First” ideologies of Trump and Noem were another. But as potentially toxic as those factors might have been in their singularity or in tandem, the event’s
location itself drew an even greater amount of ire from the Lakota people in attendance at the Keystone protest. According to the protest organizers’ website, “Not only does Mount Rushmore sit in the heart of the sacred Black Hills, but it is an international symbol of white supremacy and colonization” (“LandBack Manifesto”). This event was not a celebration of American independence, the land defenders felt, but of settler colonialism, fascism, crony capitalism, and utter corruption.

For several hours, the land defenders shouted and held protest signs and banners; some of those signs and banners announced that the reader was on stolen land, but many of them bore a simpler but equally accusatory hashtag that struck at the root of settler colonialism: #LandBack (Fig. 1). As the protest wore on and Trump’s caravan was slated to approach, a group of land defenders blocked Highway 16, the road which wends the few miles from Keystone to Mount Rushmore, with white vans and with their bodies (Fig. 2). Governor Noem called in the South Dakota National Guard, who, in conjunction with the South Dakota Highway Patrol and the Pennington County Sheriff’s Department, declared over their loudspeaker that the assembly had become unlawful and that the protestors must disperse or face arrest. After approximately fifteen minutes, during which tribal elders and other participants who wanted to avoid being jailed were able to leave, the authorities arrested 20 land defenders and whisked them off to jail in Rapid City. While most of them made bail that night, one of the event’s organizers, NDN Collective President and enrolled Oglala Lakota member Nick Tilsen, was charged with multiple felonies; these charges were briefly slated to be dropped upon his completion of a diversion program but after Tilsen refused to apologize to law enforcement, are still pending as of November 2021.

That #LandBack hashtag, first conceived in 2018 by Kainai Nation member Arnell Tailfeathers, has since been adopted by many indigenous activists, including land rights activists
and pipeline-fighting water protectors; in addition, it has gone viral repeatedly on social media, particularly Twitter. But the sentiment behind the hashtag has existed for generations, since white settlers began to encroach upon Native lands, and thus far appears to be a current and cutting-edge extension of the work begun by the American Indian Movement in the 1970s and continued by the Standing Rock water protectors in 2016. According to the Rapid City-based NDN Collective’s website, “LandBack is a movement that has existed for generations with a long legacy of organizing and sacrifice to get Indigenous lands back into Indigenous hands. Currently, there are LandBack battles being fought all across Turtle Island [North America], to the North and the South” (“LandBack Manifesto”).

Fig. 1. Protestors gather on U.S. Highway 16 on the outskirts of Keystone, S.D., on July 3, 2020, to protest the arrival of then-President Trump at Mount Rushmore. Note the prominent banner on the highway’s center line, which reads “#LANDBACK” (Binder).
In South Dakota, the site of the United States’ Supreme Court’s 1980 ruling that the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 was still valid and the Black Hills therefore still belonged to the Lakota people, the very notion of LandBack—though open to interpretation—has the potential to completely unravel the settler state’s geography and its volatile tourist economy. For Nick Tilsen and his NDN Collective organization, LandBack—and by extension, settler decolonization—mandates: “The closure of Mount Rushmore, return of that land and all public lands in the Black Hills” (“LandBack Manifesto”). That public land would include the entirety of the vast Black Hills National Forest as well as Custer and Bear Butte State Parks, Wind Cave National Park, Jewel Cave National Monument, and, of course, Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Private land would ostensibly stay in private hands—for now.

**Resistance to Revisionist History**
In January 2021, the Noem administration announced its proposal to revise South Dakota history curricula in K-12 schools via the South Dakota Civics and History Initiative, an objective which would further marginalize Native history—already an optional subject in the state. As Governor Noem proudly decreed in her 2021 State of the State address:

I have tasked my administration with creating instructional materials and classroom resources on America’s founding, our nation’s history, and the state’s history. We must also do a better job educating teachers on these three subjects. Through all of this, our common mission and key objective needs to be explaining why the United States of America is the most special nation in the history of the world. (“Read: Gov. Noem’s”)

Noem, already on tenuous ground and with plenty of detractors from both sides of the political aisle due to her previous attention-grabbing antics such as her COVID-19 non-response and her much-ridiculed anti-methamphetamine campaign, proposed at that moment an initiative which sought to teach American exceptionalism and maintain American settler colonialism.

Noem’s announcement, buried in the middle of that address, caused an enormous stir among South Dakota educators; her suspicious critics immediately cried foul, while teachers and historians became extremely concerned that the initiative was politically motivated and bravely spoke out against it. Bart Pfankuch quotes a grave warning about the risks of whitewashing history from South Dakota historian and University of South Dakota professor Molly Rozum in his article “Educators and Historians Want Politics Kept out of New History and Civics Initiative” (2021). Rozum admonishes:

It’s always an inherent risk, and you don’t want it to be “political” or from a particular perspective, and I would be concerned about that whenever a process like this occurs . . . I think you have to include multiple perspectives on events, look through different eyes,
and create a layering of complications and complexities to be truthful about historical events. (Pfankuch)

Rozum—and many other historians and teachers—rightfully worries that Noem, an extreme far-right media darling and perpetual seeker of attention, would mandate an oversimplification of South Dakota’s wholly unsavory past and propagate Manifest Destiny and frontier mythologies. Key portions of Native history, however, including the broken Fort Laramie Treaties and the Wounded Knee Massacre, would remain optional subjects. South Dakota News Watch organized a roundtable discussion of the contentious matter on the meeting platform Zoom in early April 2021, and according to Ferguson’s summary of the event, Native history was already sorely lacking in most of South Dakota’s K-12 schools: “Jace DeCory, a Lakota elder and professor emeritus at Black Hills State University, said that by the time South Dakota students entered her college classes, most had never had courses focused on American Indian history” (Ferguson “Education”). Ferguson quotes in full DeCory’s polite but firm explanation of her position on Native history as an elective subject to Noem’s Secretary of Education Tiffany Sanderson during that Zoom roundtable:

> When you omit a chunk of material like major historical events, you also omit philosophical thoughts and inclusion of how this particular minority group thinks about certain kinds of things . . . We’re not invisible. We’re still here. Native people are still on this earth. We still are contributing members of society. That has to be dealt with. (Ferguson “Education”)

DeCory’s powerful rebuke, however, did not change Sanderson’s mind. And only time will tell how this new curriculum will affect Native-settler relations in South Dakota, but we can probably predict that they will deteriorate further, and that the LandBack movement faces a very
steep climb in South Dakota, one which would—perhaps ironically—require federal intervention in order to succeed.

**Literature’s Role in Challenging Settler Colonialism**

While the decolonialism of the texts I address might seem to be a quieter, more indirect action than the LandBack land defenders’ protests or the collective outcry from educators against Noem’s proposal of revisionist history, they remain crucial, cultural tools that can help South Dakota lumber away, at long last, from the frontier narrative that helps to maintain settler colonialism. The public response to the LandBack protest in Keystone, after all, was largely unsupportive, while the response to the proposed K-12 history curricula has been mixed—trending, as it were, toward curiously ambivalent. Both responses reveal a vacuum in South Dakota’s collective understanding of the scale of settler colonialism’s grave legacy and its implications for the future. Decolonial literature, however, can help to fill this gaping void by asking readers to challenge their long-held beliefs. In her concluding remarks for *Activism and the American Novel* (2012), Channette Romero turns to Gloria Anzaldúa’s brilliant definition of literary activism to demonstrate the power of writers of color who resist the dominant, canonical paradigm, a definition so keen and searing that I, too, feel obliged to lean upon it: “Anzaldúa defines literary activism not as waging war, but as ‘the courage to act consciously on our ideas, to exert power in resistance to ideological pressure’” (173). The South Dakota writers I address in my previous chapters respond to settler colonialism in a similar way; they exert their power by refusing to capitulate to the “ideological pressure” of the frontier narrative and their works, therefore, do not help to maintain settler colonialism. And while this group of texts may not be able to immediately affect the nonreading public, they still comprise a sizable chip in the
ideological firmament of South Dakota’s cultural imaginary and can, over time, constitute a shift
in the valorization of the frontier narrative.

These South Dakota writers, in short, urge their readers to confront the legacies and
realities of settler colonialism. Literature carries great cultural currency and in that way is
*powerful*; it can help to foster empathy and potentially shape values and ethics, an important
check to the development of harmful and oppressive ideologies. And in this case, these authors
can help us imagine ways in which South Dakota might begin the important work of
decolonization. As former president of the Modern Language Association Simon Gikandi, who
was himself “born in a colonial state of emergency,” opined in his outgoing 2020 address,

> Amid the violence of the modern, this thing called literature has made it possible for
> many of us to recover the sensation of life and to yearn for values—including justice and
> beauty—that help us counter the *logic of domination*. I cannot say for certain that a life
> lived in literature offers any guarantees, but as we confront the challenges of the twenty-
> first century, a concern with small things such as words and images can perhaps enable us
to recover a measure of the human in the larger universe of things. (856, my emphasis)

In South Dakota, the prevalent “logic of domination” constitutes a guilt-free maintenance of the
settler state, and the works of Micheaux, O’Brien, Brave Bird, and Huse Wika can help us
interrogate existing values and perhaps reevaluate and reform them in the contexts of not only
justice and beauty, but also empathy, as well as sociopolitical and ecological sustainability.

Nevertheless, settler colonialism in South Dakota literature—like settler colonialism in its
politics, laws, tourism ventures, and educational institutions—will be very difficult to undo, and
in literature’s case, settler attitudes and frontier mythologies continue to influence its canonicity.
For example, in the spring of 2021, I ventured to the Badger Hole cabin in Custer State Park to
hike the half mile-long Badger Clark Historic Trail behind Clark’s former residence. As I made my way along the trail, I happened upon an interpretive sign flashily emblazoned with the title “A Cowboy Poet Lives Among the Pines.” The sign’s opening paragraph proclaims that “Badger’s brilliant writing style found a place in the hearts of the people of South Dakota. His words painted a glowing picture of Western life. He breathed life into the iconic image of the West: the prairies, the mountains, the animals.” This passage stopped me in my tracks, and I steadied myself on the icy hillside by grabbing the edge of the sign and meditating upon its dangerous content. The first sentence suggests that as loyal South Dakotans, we are supposed to dutifully revere Clark’s poetry, no matter its obvious shortcomings, which is of course an affront to any sort of critical thinking, whether of the scholastic or armchair variety. But that second sentence, “His words painted a glowing picture of Western life,” positively flummoxed me. As I point out in my discussion of Clark, he repeatedly valorized the subjugation of Native people and the landscape in his work, frequently referring to the Lakotas as a singular “red man” and touting the so-called taming of the land. And while that third sentence is essentially a throwaway line meant to reify the power of the hiker-reader’s imagined West, it also makes the absurdly anthropocentric suggestion that “the prairies, the mountains, the animals” were not breathing before one Badger Clark appeared on the scene. Thus, the literary valorization of the frontier and the maintenance of settler colonialism continues at the Badger Hole, as well as at the Ingalls Homestead in De Smet, with state-approved vigor via such enthusiastic memorializations, continually perpetuating a singular perspective rooted in Manifest Destiny and frontier mythologies.

This dissertation begins a necessary intervention with South Dakota literature and its current, pioneer-valorizing canon. South Dakota, despite its hokey and humorous tourist traps
such as Wall Drug and the Corn Palace as well as its legislative missteps that occasionally make national news for their over-the-top foolhardiness, is indeed a serious subject worthy of scholarly attention, sitting as it does at the nexus of American settler colonialism. South Dakota’s dominant culture has joked about and ultimately dismissed its sordid history for far too long already; Patricia Limerick reminds us of the United States’ general attitude toward settlement in *Legacy of Conquest* (1987): “the subject of conquest was the domain of mass entertainment and the occasion for lighthearted national escapism” (19). It is past time to take a closer, unforgiving look at that history and the myriad ways it has manifested in South Dakota’s literature and culture.

And when we take that unforgiving look at the microcosm of settler colonialism in South Dakota and understand how it is perpetuated, justified, and indeed glorified, we can better identify and understand it globally. As I have shown, a settler state’s cultural offerings not only reflect but often enable a number of nearly-irreversible settler colonial structures, and with this dissertation, I hope to help broaden the still-burgeoning field of Settler Colonial Studies from its present focus on anthropology, political science, law, and history so that it also encompasses the humanities. We can learn much from a nation-state’s justification for and facilitation of indigenous displacement; in the case of the American frontier and the outsized role of the West in the United States’ cultural imaginary, we can draw parallels between American expansionism and similar movements upon the Canadian and Australian frontiers. That Australian notion of *terra nullius*, for example, though distinct from Manifest Destiny in the U.S., still bears an uncanny resemblance to the faulty 19th century promise of “free land” of the American West. And even in settler states without frontier mythologies, such as Israel, the ongoing and systemic demonization and subjugation of Palestinians mirrors the United States’ brutal pattern of
indigenous disenfranchisement. Furthermore, by identifying settler colonialism in cultural offerings such as literature, film, music, and so forth, and studying its representation and how it undergirds or undermines displacement, we might perhaps also begin to envision alternative modes of decoloniality. While there is no clear and simple solution to settler colonialism and its enormously complex issues, imagining ways in which we might work to undo conquest, to borrow Veracini’s pragmatic idea once again, while an incomplete and probably unsatisfactory answer, would at least avoid creating additional mass migrations via “the production of further displacement” (Veracini 103). Here in South Dakota, while only time will tell whether the LandBack movement ultimately succeeds in returning the sacred Black Hills to the Lakotas, we can still act as allies in a number of ways, which include learning the state’s history, acknowledging and challenging settler colonialism, ceasing to valorize those frontier mythologies, and in dealing with its literature, by decolonizing our reading lists.
Endnotes

1 The complex and subjective term LandBack has multiple meanings and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For many Native people, the concept of LandBack involves the affirmation of tribal sovereignty and the dismantling of white supremacy and its institutions. For others, nothing less than full, physical decolonization of Native lands will suffice. To complicate matters further, returning Native lands is subject to the particularities of tribal law and might apply differently to certain Native nations, depending upon their federal recognition status and the treaties involved in their specific cases. In her introduction to her interview with Lakota and Mohawk educator Corrine Rice, Mother Jones journalist Andrea Guzman posits that LandBack “perhaps most importantly involves Natives to make decisions about land so they have a say in the construction of destructive oil pipelines” (Guzman). Rice herself notes that for the “NDN collective, which is based out of Rapid City, South Dakota . . . is focused on the side of Land Back which is about honoring treaties [in the Lakotas’ case, the broken Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868]” (Guzman).

2 See Jeffrey Ostler’s chapter 6, “The Claim” in The Lakotas and the Black Hills (2010) for details of this 56 years-long, legal saga. In that 1980 ruling, “eight of the nine justices concluded that the United States had acted without honor” and this majority “agreed with the Court of Claims’ assessment that it would difficult to find a more ‘ripe and rank case of dishonorable dealing’” (164). Despite this ruling, the Black Hills have still not been returned to the Lakota people.

3 In 2019, at the expense of unwitting South Dakota taxpayers, the Noem administration hired an advertising firm from Minnesota to invent a suitable anti-methamphetamine slogan; the firm inexplicably decided upon the comically inappropriate phrase “Meth: We’re on it.”

4 As one of Professor DeCory’s former students at Black Hills State University, I can attest that this is true; I knew a bit about the Wounded Knee Massacre after having stumbled upon a copy of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (1970) well after my graduation from T.F. Riggs High School in Pierre, South Dakota, but that was the extent of my knowledge of Native history at that point in time.
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