

TRANSNATIONAL PERIPHERIES:
NARRATIVES OF COUNTRYSIDE, MIGRATION, AND COMMUNITY IN
AMERICAN AND NORDIC MODERNISMS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Comparative Literature
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2020

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Transnational Peripheries: Narratives of Countryside, Migration, and Community in American and Nordic Modernisms

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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June 2020

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Scholarship in modernist literary and cultural studies tends to privilege urban spaces while excluding rural regions from mappings of world literature. Regional writing has been both effeminized as a genre and seen as contrary to the transnational nature of modernism, leaving little consideration for the role of the countryside in modernity. My dissertation broadens the spatial scope of modernist studies by showing how the countryside functioned as a place for women authors in peripheral locations of the world to both critique the uneven development of modernity as well as to provide alternative visions of future communities. I examine how the countryside and its communities became imagined in American and Nordic modernist literary texts written by and about linguistic and ethnic minorities in the first half of the twentieth century. My main case studies are Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), and Hagar Olsson's *Träsnidaren och döden* (1940, *The Woodcarver and Death*), and as I engage with these works, I draw from the fields of feminist regionalism, transnational modernist studies, and narrative theory.

By choosing the American and Northern European countryside and their transatlantic connections as sites of comparison, my project connects linguistic-national

literary archives typically not associated with one another, while showing how women authors in various cultural contexts employed regionalism and transnationalism as a form of feminist praxis to negotiate their place in modernity. Far from being antagonistic to modernity and cosmopolitanism, as often represented in the white and masculine canon of modernism, rural regions were used in these texts as sites for considering gendered and racialized questions of immigration, (trans)nationality, and community. Thus, my approach maps a new cartography of modernism that highlights the artistic critiques and networks of authors writing about the intersections of various historically marginalized identity categories.

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- Pöllänen, Iida. "Suomalaiselta maaseudulta transnationaaliin sfääreihin. Modernismitutkimuksen alueellinen laajentuminen." *Joutsen/Svanen. Yearbook of Finnish Literary Research*, 2018, pp. 54-72.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work exists only because of the support I have received from many individuals, communities, and societal structures along the way, and I want to express my sincerest gratitude to everyone who has been a part of my academic journey so far.

I have had the privilege to work on this project with the help of the most supportive and brilliant scholars: Professors Mark Whalan, Amanda Doxtater, Maria Mäkelä, Katya Hokanson, and Sonja Boos, thank you for being my committee members. I could not have hoped for a better advisor than Mark, whose expertise in American literature and modernist studies continues to amaze and inspire me. Maria deserves a special thank you for being my mentor and a part of my academic career literally every step of the way: from my entrance exam to the literature program at Tampere University all the way to my dissertation phase at the University of Oregon. It is evident that I would not have made it this far without Maria's support and the countless letters of recommendation she has written for me. I am also particularly indebted to Amanda, who has given me invaluable feedback on my work and encouraged me to engage with Nordic studies throughout graduate school.

Additionally, I owe a thank you to all the undergraduate students I have had the opportunity of teaching and learning with at the University of Oregon over the past seven years. Teaching has been by far the most challenging and the most meaningful part of my life in academia. When nothing else in scholarly work made sense, teaching did.

I am grateful for the following academic communities that have supported me along the way: First and foremost, the Comparative Literature graduate cohort, especially Palita Chunsangchan, Sunayani Bhattacharya, Baran Germen, Martha Ndakalako-

Bannikov, Elizabeth Howard, Bess Meyers, Tera Reid-Olds, Michelle Crowson, Matthias Kramer, Jean-Baptiste Simonnet, Yei Won Lim, and Rob Moore. Second, my dearest colleagues in my alma mater, Tampere University, with whom I have shared so many discussions and conference lodgings. Special thanks to Samuli Björninen, Mari Hatavara, Matias Nurminen, Tytti Rantanen, Hanna-Riikka Roine, and Hanna Samola. Third, the new friends and colleagues I had the privilege of making during my stay in Project Narrative at the Ohio State University. I am indebted to Robyn Warhol, Paul Dawson, Jim Phelan, and Brian McHale for providing me with invaluable feedback on my arguments concerning omniscience, and for being my narratological role models early on.

There are many people that made my life during graduate school worth living. Thanks to the international students with whom I shared my most meaningful Oregon years; Jim and Babs Sullivan for providing me a home away from home; my Tampere friends who always welcomed me back from my travels; Zach Hicks for being a wonderful comrade; Simon Wiedemann for being the best travel companion and friend; Valtteri Leinonen for years of friendship with their shared joys and sorrows; and, most importantly, my parents and my sister, who have given me everything.

Although I am graduating in the U.S., I am forever indebted to the Finnish welfare state that provided me with all the essentials and support necessary for making it this far.

This project is the outcome of unionized labor. I want to thank our graduate student employees' union, GTFF, for teaching me what solidarity looks like and for always fighting for our workers' rights.

Finally, Otto, thank you for being my rock even when we are worlds apart. I finished this project so that I could travel back to you.

This work is dedicated to Seija, Esa, and Minna.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the “Inledande efterskrift” (Introductory epilogue) of Elmer Diktonius’s *Janne Kubik* (1932), the cornerstone novel of modernist prose writing in the Finnish literary tradition, the “author” of the text complains that he attempted to write a modern novel, yet ended up with a wooden sketch of words about a simple topic and crude materials.¹ His novel has turned out to be an “anspråkslös variation” (modest modification) of what the great men of the modern novel have typed “ute i den vida världen” (out there in the big world) and he wishes they will not become afraid of the horrifying echo that their compositions have brought out in this “vilda nejd” (wild region) (Diktonius 8). Thus, Elmer Diktonius’s initial thesis – that frames his entire novel – is that modernism gets somehow twisted and becomes almost unrecognizable when it reaches the peripheral areas of the world – in this case, the far corners of Northern Europe.

This framing rests on a conventional dichotomy of the centers and peripheries of modernity and its modernist manifestations; on an idea where the urban and imperial centers of the U.S. and Europe are privileged and seen as ahead of other regions. According to this kind of thinking, modernist experimentations originated from the metropolitan, and especially European and Anglo-American locations, and were later adopted and adapted in peripheral regions like the Nordic countries. Yet, instead of essentializing and confirming such a center-periphery model, Diktonius’s novel comes to

¹ “Författaren satte sig att skriva en modern roman – och hamnade till ett träsnitt i ord” (Diktonius 7). All translations from Swedish and Finnish into English are mine unless otherwise noted.

question and complicate regional dynamics by placing the dichotomy itself into an ironic and exaggerated light and showing, through techniques such as narratorial self-reflection, paradoxical juxtapositions, and meta-commentary, how texts from the “wild regions” have every capacity to be formally experimental while also commenting on the living conditions of modern life within their specific regions. In fact, texts such as *Janne Kubik* seem to dissolve locational binaries and instead promote an idea of modernism as always on the move. The “horrifying echoes” that the novel launches show how modernisms can both have specific regional features while also never being contained within national borders.² Here, modernisms travel back and forth, get twisted and complicated in productive ways, and through such transmissions may even form new transnational communities and experiences.

The question of the relationship between supposed centers and peripheries – between urban and regional areas – at the time of modernity and in the representations of modernist texts lies at the center of my work, and consequently my dissertation participates in the larger scholarly movement of re-imagining the locations and borders of modernist studies. Singular understandings of modernism as formally experimental texts from Britain, the U.S., and mainland Europe, though prevalent in the past, have become heavily questioned in modernist and narratological literary scholarship of the past two decades. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, who map the re-examination of the field of modernism in their essay “The New Modernist Studies” (2008), explain how scholarship has begun to expand specifically in three ways since the 1990s: spatially, temporally, and vertically. While the vertical refers to a new focus on the interrelations

² For an analysis of these opening pages of *Janne Kubik* and the text’s relation to national and international understandings of modernism, see also Tidigs (*Att skriva sig* 244-45).

between high and low cultures, as well as to those between the production, dissemination, and reception of modernist texts (738), the spatial and temporal changes imply that the modernist canon needs to be questioned in order to include transnational, regional, and less experimental texts from across the world and beyond the conventional modernist time period from the late nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth. More specifically, the spatial shift has meant both a study of texts produced in “other quarters of the world [beyond the Eurocentric and Anglo-American ones]” as well as those written in the “hitherto little-recognized enclaves” of privileged areas such the U.S. (737).

My transnational project expands on these developments by analyzing how the countryside and its communities became imagined in American and Nordic modernist literary texts written by and about linguistic and ethnic minorities in the first four decades of the twentieth century.³ The point is to shift focus from the urban and metropolitan to the rural and peripheral through the works of three women authors who employed the countryside in their writings to produce political and feminist critiques. In particular, my main case studies are Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), and Hagar Olsson’s *Träsnidaren och döden* (1940, *The Woodcarver and Death*), as well as bilingual literary essays published in Finland-Swedish modernist

³ Consequently, my dissertation does not participate in the temporal expansion of modernist studies, since the texts I look at both in the U.S. and in the Nordic countries were produced during what is considered to be the period of “high modernism” in the first decades of the twentieth century. Even as I argue for the expansion of modernist scholarship to understudied regions, I do not aim to claim that any and all texts written during this time period were modernist. In my understanding, modernism can be defined along thematic, formal, and material lines – and these three aspects are often interconnected. Modernist literature engages thematically with the developments of modernity (issues from urbanization to cosmopolitanism and modern understandings of race), while it also experiments with either new literary forms or with old forms in new ways. Additionally, modernist literature was often published in venues that were particular to modernism; for example, in both the Nordic region and in the U.S., little magazines played a central part in the material production of modernism.

periodicals of the 1920s. What links these fictional works, besides their countryside milieus and minority characters, is a transnational movement between the U.S. and Northern Europe. For example, Willa Cather explores the role Nordic immigrants play in shaping the future of the American countryside as well as the culture of the U.S. at large. Meanwhile, Nella Larsen's heroine in *Quicksand* searches for her own place in regions ranging from the racially and sexually oppressive American countryside to the cultural arenas of the Danish elite in Copenhagen. Finally, Finland-Swedish minority author Hagar Olsson critiques cosmopolitan wishes for transatlantic travel and imagines, instead, an alternative transnational migration to Karelia – the eastern, rural region of Finland that was lost to the Soviet Union during the time of Olsson's writing.

By taking as point of departure the minority and immigrant characters of the peripheral regions of the Nordic and American countryside, my dissertation asks how rural representations were used in modernist literature to consider gendered questions of immigration, (trans)nationality, and community. My case studies center on linguistic, racial, and ethnic minorities while raising questions of national identity and migration; what it means to belong to multiple nations – or none at all – in the face of the social conditions of modernity. By analyzing these texts, I want to ask what place the regional and the peripheral have in the modern world, and what role minorities and immigrants may hold in such locations. These questions are further tied with the issue of narrative form in modernist literature; how are the ideological and political stakes of my rural case studies brought forward and discussed through particular narrative techniques? In other words, how do the poetics of these texts affect their politics?

In addition to analyzing the rural representations of my literary case studies, I look at the ways in which certain authors and literary movements have been “regionalized” in literary criticism, theory, and history. In other words, I am interested in how authors and texts focused on the countryside have often been pushed to the periphery of literary studies by categorizing them dismissively as “regional,” which is further associated with other definitions such as “rural,” “minor,” and “feminine,” in opposition to more “universal,” “major,” or “masculine” traditions. The point is to partake in the expansion of modernist studies by questioning such acts of condescending and gendered regionalization and by bringing to the spotlight literary examples easily deemed minor or peripheral to the development of modernist aesthetics.

Thus, my contribution to the spatial expansion of literary studies manifests in two ways: by placing Nordic, and particularly Finnish and Finland-Swedish texts side by side with American literature, I highlight a region of the world that has long been forgotten even in Comparative Literature studies, and by looking at regional authors within the U.S., I shift focus to less privileged locations within American literary studies. Consequently, the concept of ‘periphery’ comes into play in two ways in my research: firstly, it refers to the countryside milieu of my primary literature. The literary texts I analyze, through their rural representations, consider the complexities of location in the urbanizing, industrializing, and globalizing world (and world market) and, thus, negotiate the place that the rural or regional holds within such a modern context. Secondly, the periphery refers to the place that these literatures – both Finnish literature at large and regional American literature more specifically – have held within Comparative Literature and English Literature studies. My reading of Nordic primary literature can be seen, in a

sense, as doubly peripheral: its representations of characters' movement between urban centers and rural peripheries *within* countries such as Finland or Sweden can simultaneously be seen as a commentary on the larger issue of these countries as possible sites of periphery in comparison to the rest of Europe, and as 'others' to European and American modern metropolises.

1.2. METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL INTERVENTIONS

My work lies at the intersection of modernist studies and narrative theory and I am particularly interested in three theoretical orientations within them: namely, transnational modernist studies, regional literary studies, and feminist narrative theory. Though I will detail the theoretical debates in the following chapters more fully, I will here shortly outline the three major discussions I draw from as well as my interventions into these fields.

The first of these concerns the spatial – and particularly the transnational – expansion of modernist studies. The recent fifteen years or so have witnessed an abundance of scholarly terms coined to describe the global nature of modernism – from “modernism at large” (Huyssen) to “transnational modernism” (*Modernism/Modernity* 13.3), and “planetary modernism” (Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*), to name just a few examples. What unites many of these new spatial explorations is an attempt to move the scholarly focus to the non-Western world and to look at the cross-cultural travels of modernisms without creating fixed Eurocentric hierarchies of ‘primary and secondary’ or ‘early and late’ movements.

This theoretical ambition to de-center supposed origins and canons of modernism, to give voice to the othered, to focus on the (de)colonized, and to move from the national to the transnational is both admirable and necessary. Such takes on modernism, even prior to the recent transnational trend, have been particularly meaningful in highlighting formerly colonized regions and in analyzing how the processes of global capitalism and colonialism have created modern conditions – and thus the conditions for modernisms – throughout the world.⁴ Yet, in these attempts to question Eurocentric and Anglo-American canons, the linguistic ‘others’ in Europe, such as Finnish and Finland-Swedish literature, have continued to fall outside of scholarly discussion, while much scholarship either still emphasizes literature written in English, or focuses on the literature of the former British Empire (P. Lewis 1). My theoretical intervention thus deals with the loss of specific linguistic groups from mappings of modernist literature; within the transnational turn, what happens to the forgotten modernisms that remain forgotten? How does one study the complex networking of modernism and its different manifestations in such (seeming) fringes of the world as Finland?

⁴ For early and influential takes on these topics, see especially Fredric Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity* as well as Simon Gikandi’s work. Gikandi has argued that the postcolonial experience became articulated in literary form through the language and structure of modernism: “The archive of early postcolonial writing in Africa, the Caribbean, and India is dominated and defined by writers whose political or cultural projects were enabled by modernism even when the ideologies of the latter, as was the case with Eliot, were at odds with the project of decolonization” (“Preface: Modernism” 420). Following Gikandi, many transnational takes on modernism focus on a postcolonial lens and on formerly colonized locations, such as the Caribbean region (see, for example, all articles in the “Modernism and Transnationalisms” special issue of *Modernism/modernity*). What I am interested in is asking how minor places such as Finland, that do not neatly fit into a colonizer-colonized model, could also be included in current transnational studies.

It is also worth mentioning that not everyone fully agrees with the transnational turn of modernist studies. For example, Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins question “the commonplace that modernism is a transnational or even supranational entity” by focusing on the regional and national locations of English-language modernist poetry in the U.S. and Britain (4).

Here, I turn to the type of research conducted in Laura Winkiel and Laura Doyle's edited collection *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (2005). In Winkiel and Doyle's work, the term 'modernism' is understood as breaking open into "geomodernisms, which signals a locational approach to modernisms' engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity" (3). Such an approach allows for a transnational look at modernisms as they occurred across the world in all their complexities and contradictions, while erasing the need to hierarchize or prioritize separate modernisms (see also Thomsen, *Centring on the*). Yet, it is important to remain attuned to the inherent threats of such comparative and cross-cultural intentions: the possibility of reading marginalized texts against the contexts of dominant literatures, or as re-interpretations, secondary, or late to the texts produced in the so-called centers of modernity.

Drawing from such transnational work as the geomodernist approach, my dissertation places Finnish and especially Finland-Swedish modernisms on the map of world literature side by side with American modernisms. The point is to study how a similar and simultaneous phenomenon of forming new understandings of the countryside was taking place in these two different national-linguistic locations, within their own unique historical contexts. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of influences and interrelations between the studied literatures. Indeed, the transnational and even multilingual nature of American modernism has been much discussed in recent scholarship (Miller; Sollors), and I will take part in these debates by tracing some of the cultural and material links through which American modernisms were in discussion with the Nordic scene. Not all of the Nordic authors I discuss had conscious and explicit

influences or relations to American modernists, and it is important to emphasize that even when they did, such relations are not meant to function as justification for the study of, for example, Finnish literature. The study of minority literatures should not depend on their (im)possible connections to dominant world literatures.⁵ Thus, in this juxtaposition of American and Finnish regional modernisms, one will not be placed as original or prior to the other. Finnish modernism was not a re-reading and -writing of American (or continental European) modernisms. Yet, as my dissertation hopes to show, placing these literatures in discussion with one another can reveal new insights to our understanding of each of them.

The second, and perhaps most significant, theoretical intervention of my project has to do with the status of regionalism as a part of modernist and literary studies. Regional modernism in the American context typically refers to literature that in the midst of the modern turmoil turned to scrutinize the countryside regions and small towns of the U.S. and was often (though not always) published outside the major cities of the time. Modernist studies have traditionally focused on the urban and the metropolitan at the expense of such countryside depictions of regional modernism (Andree 16; Herring 2), to the extent where modernism has at times become equated with the metropolitan. In Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's classical account, *Modernism, 1890-1930* (1976), the modernist movement is described as "a metropolitan art" (101) and as "an art of cities" (96), and such emphasis on urban areas has continued throughout the decades. Even today, scholars working on regional modernism often start their inquiry by justifying, in a nearly apologetic manner, the seemingly counterintuitive decision to place

⁵ In addition to other problems, this kind of an approach would only highlight a small group of privileged authors who had the material and economic possibilities for such connections.

regionalism in connection to modernism.⁶ There are multiple reasons for this; regionalism has been seen as antagonistic to the international nature of modernism, and due to its association with the local color tradition dominated by women authors in the U.S., it has been effeminized and belittled as a genre (Fetterley and Pryse; O'Brien, "Becoming Noncanonical").⁷

Consequently, much of modernist scholarship has yet to attend to the political potential that countryside representations and their gendered and ethnic divides hold in modernism. My hope is to bring more attention to such rural modernisms and to participate in the project of recovering regional writing, where regionalism is understood as a minor literature that focuses on rural spaces and the political critiques such spaces bring forth. In doing so, I draw heavily from the feminist regional criticism of scholars such as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse. In their book *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2005), Fetterley and Pryse shift focus from geographical definitions of regionalism towards an understanding of regional literature as political commentary and resistance; as a "discourse or a mode of analysis, a vantage point within the network of power relations that provides a location for critique and resistance" (11). As Fetterley and Pryse further explain, regional texts tell "unconventional, noncanonical, and counterhegemonic stories" and bring to the spotlight

⁶ As an example, John N. Duvall starts his chapter on "Regionalism in American Modernism" in the *Cambridge Companion to American Modernism* by saying that an attempt to link regionalism to American modernism may seem "at first blush, a perverse enterprise" (242).

⁷ Despite spatial expansions, the transnational trend in modernist studies has seldom been interested in the relations between the regional and the global, as these concepts are often seen as antagonistic. Sara Blair has noted how "the move to nationalize and transnationalize modernist cultural production has tended to obscure its life as a local phenomenon" (814). Neil Alexander and James Moran point out how this is a valid concern, especially since "[a]t first glance, enthusiasm for tracing transnational exchanges appears to offer scant support for the idea of regional modernisms" (3).

characters that occupy positions that dominant culture defines as “regional,” further equated with “crazy, queer, exotic, or local” (37). In the feminist analytic, regional areas become locations of resistance and political commentary, making it possible to compare peripheral and minor texts from various different locations.

Thus, my focus on regionalism is also connected to the transnational intervention I outlined earlier, as I hope to suggest that a regional lens can function as an alternative framework for doing comparative and transnational analysis beyond English-language literature. Though regionalism and internationalism are commonly viewed as mutually exclusive lenses, particularly in modernist studies, American regional scholars from Amy Kaplan to Richard Brodhead have shown how “regionalism – rather than being sealed off from global commitments and affinities – was in fact thoroughly informed by them” (Whalan 131; see also Cadle; Lutz). Indeed, the idea of analyzing regional literature from a global vantage point has become a cornerstone of studies that focus on nineteenth-century local color literature and twentieth-century regional texts in the U.S.

Due to these more positive re-evaluations of regionalism – where regional texts are seen as feminist, critical, affirmative, global, etcetera – it has become more acceptable to imagine a “regional modernism” as well. One example of such work is Neal Alexander and James Moran’s edited collection *Regional Modernisms* (2013), which attempts to combat the urban bias of modernist scholarship by paying attention to regional and local modernist concerns. Though the volume focuses exclusively on British and Irish literature, Alexander and Moran highlight the compatibility of regional and international lenses, explaining how internationalist and cosmopolitan sensibility can arise “paradoxically, from situations and contexts that are distinctively local or provincial” (2).

Indeed, one of the arguments I will make in the following chapters is that the transnational turn should not take place at the expense of the local and the regional. My project analyzes the transatlantic movements between rural peripheries and, thus, debunks the idea of regionalism as being oppositional to the cosmopolitan nature of modernism. Instead, I hope to offer a model for studying the complex networking of modernism and its different manifestations in the seeming fringes of the world.

Though regionalism has gained some new traction in literary studies, modernist regional scholarship has remained focused on English-speaking authors (Alexander and Moran; Andree; Head; James), while much less research exists on the transnational and minority features of regionalism, or on regionalism's manifestations in other national-linguistic contexts. A recent, wonderful exception to this is the edited collection *Nordic Literature: A Comparative History. Volume I, Spatial Nodes* (2017), which advocates precisely for the type of regional, yet also comparative and transnational framework I hope to continue here. In their introduction to the collection, Steven P. Sondrup and Mark B. Sandberg argue that a focus on regions can replace the dominant geographical framework of the nation-state, thus highlighting new "centers" of literary study:

This is the sense in which "region" can be used as an experimental and explanatory construct to reveal perspectives that might be hidden by the reproduction of the dominant logics of national literature, canonical authorship, and literary periodization. The choice of new kinds of "centers" to investigate . . . allows literary history to renew itself in sometimes surprising ways. (18)

Throughout my project, I will continue the regional work of such scholars and see how previous interpretations of regional community and identity become complicated when the focus shifts not only from the urban to the rural, but to representations of ethnic and linguistic minorities within such countryside locations. By bringing together the American and Northern European countryside and their transatlantic connections, my project expands the regional analytic and connects linguistic-national literary archives typically not associated with one another.

To conclude, the point of employing feminist regionalism in my project is twofold: Firstly, it can help the peculiarly peripheral locations of the world to be placed side by side with the dominating ones. In the case of my work, it allows for a comparative study of Nordic and American texts. By moving from the concept of the nation to that of the region, feminist regionalism can provide a transnational frame of analysis, particularly since the phenomenon of modernity affected the countryside all over the world with authors from various locations responding to similar developments and crisis. Second, feminist regionalism can add to and complicate the already existing regional scholarship where regionalism – both in the American and Nordic context – is often coupled with conservative, nationalist, and even racist or fascist forms of thinking. With its focus on the political critiques and marginal voices of the countryside, feminist regionalism can differentiate between different uses of rural settings and highlight texts that employed the countryside to advocate, for example, post-national and inclusive future visions, instead of just national and exclusive ones.

Finally, my third theoretical intervention has to do with narratology. By employing narrative theory, my project brings attention to the formal aspects of the

modernist texts I study, while also broadening the type of literature typically analyzed within narrative studies. Classical narratology was built on a modernist canon, yet one that was nearly exclusively white and masculine: the early decades of narratology focused on the works of such authors as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner.⁸ Even today, decades after the post-classical narratological turn, the field is still focused on Anglo-American literature while also consisting predominantly of white scholars.⁹ Historically, writings by female and minority authors have received less formal attention and analysis in literary scholarship, since such texts have largely been subjected to heavily biographical and contextualizing readings. This project brings literature written about and by linguistic and ethnic minorities to the forefront of narrative analysis, thus following the post-classical feminist turn of the late 1980s that has attempted to expand narratological canons and combine formal and narrative analysis with a rigorous account of texts' historical, political, and cultural contexts.

The origins (and continuation) of feminist narratology can be found in the writings of Susan S. Lanser, Robyn Warhol, Judith Roof, and Kathy Mezei. Lanser's

⁸ Consider, for example, such narratological giants as Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes, whose research focuses largely on a European male canon. Seymour Chatman, though working mostly on a masculine modernist canon, does include discussions of authors such as Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield (*Story and Discourse*). The structuralist origins and claims for universal poetics of classical narratology have been acknowledged and critiqued ever since the 1980s, when feminist narratology initiated the "post-classical" turn of the field. Quickly accompanied by post-structuralist, postcolonial, and other interventions, post-classical narratology as a whole has begun to pay more attention to the historical contexts and politics of texts, while broadening the type of literature studied in narratology.

⁹ The International Society for the Study of Narrative's (ISSN) annual conference in 2017 hosted a separate session on the topic of "Inclusion and Diversity in ISSN: A Critical Conversation," asking members to consider how narrative studies can "engage more diverse, non-Eurocentric, and non-normative theories of narrative" in the future, as well as broaden the diversity of narrative scholars.

early work in *The Narrative Act* (1981) illuminated the “complete disregard of gender in the formalist study of narrative voice” (46) while analyzing point of view with an ideological, contextual, and feminist approach. A formative year for the feminist development was 1986, when Lanser’s “Toward a Feminist Narratology” and Robyn Warhol’s “Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot” were published. The two scholars came to conclude separately during this time period that “androcentric narratology had overlooked the structures . . . found in women’s writings” (Warhol and Lanser 5). Yet, apart from individual articles published on the topic, entire works dedicated to feminist narrative theory have been scarce. For example, Lanser and Warhol’s *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (2015) is the first collection of feminist narrative theory to appear since Kathy Mezei’s *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* in 1996. As the titles of some of these early works indicate, feminist narratology during its first decades was much focused on a nineteenth-century, English-speaking, white women’s literary canon.

Out of all the post-classical trends within narratology – from rhetorical to cognitive, postcolonial and so forth – feminist narrative theory comes closest to the type of work I engage here. Yet, it is necessary to acknowledge the possible problems and pitfalls of a field that combines narratology with other literary and cultural studies approaches. What does “feminist narrative theory” or “feminist narratology” mean at its best, or at its worst? Scholars such as Ansgar Nünning propose a complimentary take, where cultural studies and narratological approaches can enrich one another in an interdisciplinary manner: “the more narratological literary and cultural history becomes

and the more historically and culturally oriented narratology becomes, the better for both” (345). This sounds like the ideal road to take, but other scholars have been more doubtful about the possibility of an equal collaboration between “narratology” and other literary or cultural studies fields. In a wonderful take on “feminist” and “queer” narrative theories, Abby Coykendall points out how

Regrettably, in whichever sequence the adjectives “feminist” and “queer” happen to fall, the compound noun which they together modify, “narrative theory,” remains the implicit center of gravity and unspoken rationale for each. That arrangement in turn demotes feminist and queer theories to mere adjuncts of narrative theory – secondary, subsidiary, superficial figures to its seminal ground. (326)

Though Coykendall focuses on “feminist” and “queer” narrative studies, the same issue can be seen in post-classical, critical race studies, and other such intersecting fields that have come into contact with narratology. As Coykendall points out, in many framings of post-classical narratology, questions of gender, sexuality, race, and class remain peripheral to the core research interests and practices of “proper” narratology (330). I would argue that an important factor in this problem is the tendency to treat feminist theories as inherently “thematic” approaches in contrast to form-focused narratology. In *Postclassical Narratology* (2010), Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik categorize “feminist, queer, ethnic or minority-related, and postcolonial approaches to narrative” as “thematic” in their orientation (3), and ask “[i]n what way do feminist and queer approaches go beyond the thematic highlighting of male (patriarchal and heteronormative) dominance in literature?” (7). Such form-content oppositions imply that

feminist takes end up repeating the same (thematic) mantra, while they also misleadingly undermine or ignore all the formal work that feminist narrative scholars have done in the past three decades.

Along with these definitions of post-classical narratologies often comes the more or less unstated assumption that narratology remains the “objective” theoretical lens, while any sort of political inclinations typically associated with terms such as “feminist,” “postclassical,” or “queer” make them subjective additions. An example of this is Jim Phelan’s early conceptualization of his field of rhetorical narratology. In his survey of forty years of narratological study, “Narrative Theory, 1966–2006: A Narrative,” Phelan suggests that rhetorical narratology differs from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and Marxist approaches because it is untainted by the scholars’ “a priori political commitments” (9). Whereas in approaches focusing on gender, race, and class “the political commitments of the critic often provide the lens through which the critic views the object of study” (6), the rhetorical critic is able to overcome such subjective and political commitments. Phelan argues that the rhetorical critic does “ethical criticism from the inside out rather than the outside in” (11). In other words, “rather than applying a pre-existing ethical system to the narrative, she seeks to discover the implicit value system of the text and how the author uses it to accomplish the communicative purposes of the narrative” (11). Phelan’s life-long contribution to the field of narrative studies is insurmountable, and his rhetorical approach has given important tools for analyzing the politics of texts and their effects on readers – whether from a feminist perspective or not. But to suggest that one’s theoretical approach is beyond political interests – as well as able to approach a text on its own ‘pure’ terms – is a contestable argument. This is

especially so in the context of narratology – a field that was established upon universalizing, apolitical, and objective claims that have been shown to be both problematic and false.

As Martin Joseph Ponce has argued, what is ultimately incongruous about the fields of narratology and feminist studies is their intellectual histories as well as their political commitments and engagements (336). Ponce’s questioning of the fields’ compatibility is worth citing at length, because it is fundamental to the issues I raise in this project, too:

What about the tensions between the potential of narrative theory’s imperialist appropriation (its treatment of narratives by women, sexual dissidents, or racial and colonized others as a “raw material” for testing out the reach of theoretical frameworks), on one hand, and a genuine commitment to accounting for and historicizing racial, class, religious, and national differences and practices, on the other? Is the goal to explore how tools from narratology can bring renewed attention to issues of narrative form in feminist and queer expressive cultures? Or are we asking that narratology be impacted and reshaped by the urgencies presented by feminist and queer studies and politics? (335)

As Ponce points out, these are central questions about the very practice of “theory” – “what it is, what it’s for, and what forms it takes” (338). I would argue that as long as the end goal of “narrative theory” – whether with a “feminist” tag or not – is strictly to create new terms, categories, and systems of analysis for academic scholarly practice, such theory remains anti-feminist and anti-political (though certainly not

apolitical). This is what I mean with the question of what feminist narrative theory can be at its worst – a mining of minority authors’ texts in order to advance a more comprehensive “poetics” or interesting examples of literary analysis solely for academic usage.

Despite my hesitations about the compatibility of narratology and feminism, I do not think that the feminist narratologists I cite here have taken part in such problematic projects. In fact, the core idea of feminist narrative theory, as explained by scholars such as Lanser and Warhol, is central to my work; narratives are, after all, “critical to constructing, maintaining, interpreting, exposing and dismantling social systems, cultural practices, and individual lives that shape and are shaped by performative acts” (Warhol and Lanser 7-8.) At its best, a feminist narrative field attempts to uncover the functioning of systems of oppression, which can contribute to the questioning and dismantling of said structures outside of academia. Coykendall’s argument is that feminist studies should not be treated as “extraneous, extradisciplinary addendums to narrative studies proper” (332). Similarly, Lanser suggests a reversal of priorities in narrative research: allowing feminist, queer, and postcolonial topics precedence “over standard narratological priorities – priorities often articulated in daunting terminology – points the way toward a practice of narratology that can make its own case for relevance” (Lanser, “Toward (a Queerer)” 32).¹⁰ Perhaps feminist first, narrative second, is what describes my focus in this project.

¹⁰ The two, however, have contrasting opinions on the extent to which the narratol-ogy of narrative theory should be embraced and emphasized. Lanser advocates for feminist, queer, and narrative studies to become more “narratological,” with a renewed emphasis on its formal possibilities (“Toward (a Queerer)” 24), whereas Coykendall critiques the entire concept of “postclassical narratology” and argues for the substitution of “narratology” with “narrative studies” in order for the field to become truly inclusive and interdisciplinary (332). For a short discussion of the usage of “narratology” versus “narrative theories” in a feminist and queer context, see Warhol and Lanser (1-2).

The point is not to discount the importance of narratives and narrative analysis, but to be critically aware of the purposes of such analysis.

Due to New Modernist Studies' expansion to new modes, regions, and time periods of literary texts, which includes a conscious effort to place less emphasis on formal experimentation as the defining aspect of modernism, literary scholarship within the field has started to pay somewhat less attention to the formal and narrative analysis of modernist fiction.¹¹ And yet, in order to account for the politics of the expanding canon of modernism, formal aspects such as narrative strategies need to be critically studied. As Susan Lanser has recently argued, form should not be separated from questions of content, but rather form should be seen *as* textual and social content ("Toward (a Queerer)" 24-5, 37). Narratives are able to succeed "by covering the tracks of [their] own strategies," and narrative theory can function as a pathway to understanding the dynamics that stories aim to conceal (23).

Thus, when analyzing the rural representations of my modernist case studies, the point is to understand how narrative participates in the construction, reinforcement, and subversion of gender, race, class, region, and other intersecting aspects of identity.¹² How do women modernists use formal innovation to explore the nature of gendered, racialized, and regionalized experience in the U.S. and in the Nordic region? Here, narrative theories of voice, consciousness, and character will be at the forefront of my study. Voice is not

¹¹ A similar criticism has been made, for example, by David James and Urmila Seshagiri.

¹² Robyn Warhol defines an analysis of how "narrative participates in the construction, reinforcement, and subversion of gender" as the goal of feminist narratology ("Character" 119). By adding other intersecting aspects of identity, such as race and class, to a study of gender, I am drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential work in legal and critical race studies. Crenshaw first coined the term "intersectionality" when studying the discrimination African American women experienced along both racial and gender lines ("Demarginalizing the Intersection"; "Mapping the Margins").

only a formal question in the narratological sense of narrator-character relations, but also modernist in an ideological sense: it becomes a device that shows how characters try to deal with the changing social conditions of the modern world. In many of my case studies, narrative voice is not employed in its conventional modernist understanding as liminal, multiple, and fallible points of view, but rather surprisingly as a re-employment of more or less authorial and intrusive third person narrators. These strategies that diverge from canonical understandings of modernist formal experimentation show how the entire concept of “experimentality” in both modernist and narrative studies has often been based on an understanding of white men’s literature. What counts as formal experimentation needs to be understood in broader terms in order to account for authors who innovated with techniques that differed from the canonical mainstream, or even authors who employed old techniques for new means, thus easily mistaken by critics as conservative.¹³

To conclude, my project maps a history of women authors whose artistic works have provided political commentary and functioned as forms of resistance in the early decades of the twentieth century. My approach highlights how the texts’ countryside locations bring out critiques of the uneven development of modernity, showing how region becomes one of the intersections of identity along with gender, race, class, and language. It is indeed the complex intersections of my case studies’ characters’ identities and the ways in which they are narrated – Who is given voice? From whose point of view is regional identity negotiated? – that is at the center of much of my work. If regional works function as a vantage point for discussing, critiquing, and resisting power relations,

¹³ See Michael Bibby’s work on how African American modernist authors have been excluded from the modernist canon, partly due to the fact that scholars have defined “experimentality” along a white line and (mis)interpreted black modernist uses of form as traditional and conservative.

as Pryse and Fetterley have suggested (11), it is necessary to analyze how these texts offer a multiplicity of perspectives, and what kinds of theorizations of alternative future communities they imagine in their critique. Without an adequate analysis of rural regions and their minority points of view, we marginalize voices that took part in the artistic world-making of modernity, which further leads to a one-sided conceptualization of the modernist movement. My dissertation tackles this issue by analyzing narrative fiction about minority characters who, despite their peripheral homes, traverse national and linguistic borders, as well as create alternative visions of modern communities.

1.3. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS AND CASE STUDIES

The following three chapters are dedicated to the women modernists at the center of my work: Willa Cather, Nella Larsen, and Hagar Olsson. Each chapter focuses on one of these authors and their linguistic, racial, and ethnic literary contexts, as well as a discussion of their differing narrative strategies – from omniscience to free indirect discourse and we-narration. Throughout my project, I will place the works of these three women in conversation with other modernists on both sides of the Atlantic: the list includes figures such as Sherwood Anderson, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Marja-Liisa Vartio, Elin Wägner, Eyvind Johnson, Olavi Paavolainen, and Henrik Ibsen. The point is to provide an example of transnational, rural literary analysis that focuses on the politics of countryside representations in early twentieth century America and Northern Europe.

I begin my case studies in Chapter 2 with a look at representations of Nordic immigrants in rural and small town America in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*.

Cather's novel, the second part of her so-called "Prairie Trilogy," follows the life and travels of Swedish-American singer Thea Kronborg from her rural small town origins to transnational fame. Cather was dedicated to multiculturalism and representations of linguistic and ethnic minorities in her work, and her interest in such topics has been much noted in scholarship. Often, these conversations and Cather's pro-immigration stances are framed with her own background as someone who grew up among dislocated and immigrant peoples in the rural Midwest.¹⁴ These topics were also central to the cultural climate of early twentieth-century America, when heated debates over Americanization, nativism, and melting-pot integration took place. As Sarah Wilson explains in *Melting-Pot Modernism*, Cather was one of the authors writing between 1891 and 1920, when "over 18 million foreign-born migrants entered the United States" (2). Many authors of the time took part in discussing and debating these historical migratory movements and, for Cather, the central setting for such discussions was rural small town America.

Within American regional studies, the small town has received its own share of critical examinations and many have seen early twentieth century regional writing, especially the "revolt from the village" tradition, as a critique of the backwardness, anti-modernity and anti-culturalism of the countryside (Lutz 104). In contrast to such texts, Cather ties regionalism with transnationalism; for her, the global is the way to the local,

¹⁴ Joseph Urgo explains how "Cather's childhood was spent among various dislocated peoples, including Virginians, like herself, but also including German, Swedish, Irish, English, Danish, and Bohemian immigrant settlers in the area. Her family settled in Red Cloud, in Webster County, Nebraska, an agricultural area characterized by miles and miles of wheat and corn – and little else. Land companies advertised aggressively to recruit labor from Europe, enticing emigrants with American dreams of land ownership" ("The Cather thesis" 36).

and vice versa.¹⁵ In one of her famous essays, Cather notes how “It is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up; that we may hope to find young talent which will challenge the pale proprieties, the insincere, conventional optimism of our art and thought” (“Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle” 238). I will analyze how such conceptualizations of region and culture are tied to issues of ethnicity and empire in *The Song of the Lark*. My focus will be on the role that the omniscient narrator plays in guiding the reader’s empathies and political affiliations with regard to these topics. Therefore, my analysis sheds new light on Cather’s narrative strategies that have thus far received little scholarly attention, while I also challenge some of the basic assumptions about narrative formal innovation in modernism. One of the central arguments I make is that omniscience stayed alive within the modernist movement through the works of regional modernists, and it helped Cather construct an image of America as a transnational empire, as well as portray Nordic immigrants in the countryside as the future hope of American cultural life.

Chapter 2 also looks at the various cases that have been made against regional writing – both in early twentieth-century literature and public commentary, as well as in later literary scholarship. The point is to both shed light on the accusations that have been made against regional literature in previous scholarship as well as to offer a counter-lens through feminist regional studies. By interpreting how *The Song of the Lark* responds to

¹⁵ Cather famously declared that “One must know the world so well before one can know the parish” (qtd. in Curtin iii). For an analysis of this statement and Cather’s commitment to a comparative and cosmopolitan perspective of the local, see Reynolds (66).

political debates of its time through a rural lens, I hope to complicate the urban bias of much of modernist scholarship.

Chapter 3 moves focus to Nella Larsen and her debut novel *Quicksand*. The novel's biracial protagonist, Helga Crane, constantly migrates in search of a place of belonging; she moves between rural small towns, Chicago, and New York, and even travels across the Atlantic to Denmark. Like Cather, Larsen was born and raised (for the most part) in the Midwest, and *Quicksand's* protagonist, similarly to Thea, is the descendant of a Nordic immigrant and lives part of her life in rural, small town America. To frame Larsen in the company of Cather as a regional or Scandinavian-American author, however, goes against the norm of Larsen scholarship. Typically, Nella Larsen has been theorized as an African American female author in the context of the Harlem Renaissance – the early twentieth century modernist movement that participated in the uplift of the African American community. Meanwhile, Larsen's biographical and literary connections to the Nordic countries have been, for the most part, either denied or significantly downplayed in scholarly debates (see Larson; Davis; cf. Hutchinson).

This chapter begins by discussing how both Larsen's writings and the Black Renaissance at large have been regionalized as specifically urban and American phenomena, and then moves to critically analyze the recent transnational push to understand African American modernisms in a more global context (see Doyle; Edwards). I argue that the double periphery I outlined earlier holds in Larsen scholarship, too: the marginalization of the countryside in favor of an urban focus, and the marginalization of peripheries like the Nordic countries in favor of more dominant, English-language lenses and contexts. What I am interested in is looking beyond the

urban and American contours of the Renaissance movement and focusing instead on its rural and non-Anglophone transnational geographies. Therefore, I will approach *Quicksand's* Helga through her intersecting identity as an African American woman *and* as a second-generation Danish immigrant, paying attention to the regions of *Quicksand* that have received less scholarly attention: the Nordic chapters in Denmark, and the rural chapters in the American South.

The majority of the chapter analyzes the intersections of race, class, and gender in Larsen's *Quicksand* by focusing on Helga's biraciality through a regional and transnational lens. In Larsen's novel, racial and geographical indeterminacy become entwined. I argue that the Danish and rural locations become central to the novel's critiques of poverty and racial relations in Jim Crow America, while they also bring forth major changes in narrative form. *Quicksand* is canonically understood as a feminist novel, but I complicate these earlier interpretations through a re-reading of the text's use of free indirect discourse and hierarchies of voice between Helga and the heterodiegetic narrator. The Nordic location provides Helga with necessary distance from the systematic injustices of the U.S., and this freedom also manifests in Helga's narrative agency: in the Danish chapters, Helga takes control of creating her own version of who she wants "Helga Crane" to be. In contrast, in the rural ending of the novel, the narrator undermines Helga's own voice and takes ironic distance in order to portray the rural small town as an oppressing and patriarchal space. Thus, the Danish and rural locations become connected as the staging ground for the novel's battle over narrative agency.

Additionally, I will highlight unexplored intertextual connections between Larsen's writing and the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough. The Nordic region is not

only present in *Quicksand* through Helga's time spent in Denmark, but it also permeates her life in secluded, rural Alabama through Nordic intertextual echoes. The point is to analyze how the rural South becomes associated with the Nordic region in *Quicksand* on both formal, thematic, and intertextual levels, thus illuminating the regional and transnational links present in my modernist case studies.

Finally, Chapter 4 moves to study the manifestations of regional modernisms in the Nordic countries. Although Northern Europe is a part of the transnational movements analyzed throughout my project – from the Nordic-American immigrants of Cather's writings to the Nordic geographies and intertextualities of Larsen's oeuvre – here I will focus more on the modernisms written and published within the Nordic region. I will begin by overviewing the spatial expansion of modernist studies and then look at accounts and omissions of the Nordic countries in recent scholarly takes on global modernisms. After reviewing the typical ideas and (mis)conceptions about Nordic modernism and how it has been regionalized as peripheral and secondary in the development of modernisms, I move on to analyze Finnish modernism's relations to the countryside with a particular focus on Finland's largest minority, the Swedish speaking Finland-Swedes.

The main case study of this chapter is Hagar Olsson and her novel *Träsnidaren och döden: Berättelse från Karelen (Woodcarver and Death)*. Olsson was not only a key theoretical figure during the birth of modernism in Finland, but also a prolific modernist author, playwright, and essayist. *Träsnidaren och döden* is a particularly significant text for the present study because it discusses questions of community and (trans)national

identity in the context of Karelia – the largely rural area bordering Finland and Russia that was partly lost to the Soviet Union during Olsson’s writing time.¹⁶

Unlike the U.S., which is often framed as a nation of immigrants, Finland has been politically constructed as a rather closed community that shifted from Swedish to Russian imperial rule and finally to independence in 1917. The years leading to independence ignited battles over national and linguistic autonomy, as well as debates regarding the racialization of Finns as an inferior people in comparison to their Scandinavian neighbors. This history deeply affected the development of modernisms in the Finnish context, since the battles for national independence and the birth of modernism were contemporaneous events in Finland. Olsson’s *Träsnidaren och döden*, for example, addresses these topics by depicting a Finnish man as an immigrant within his own nation, travelling to the lost Karelian countryside in order to find a rural yet transnational alternative to modern city-living. The formal focus of this chapter is on the curious we-narrator of Olsson’s novel, who turns out to be the voice of the Karelian townspeople. My narrative analysis reveals how the we-narrator forms a collective understanding of voice, while ideologically balancing between national essentializing and post-nationalism, between cosmopolitan hopes of migration and fears of colonization, ultimately depicting rural Karelia as an artistic site of collective humanity.

The final chapter emphasizes my overall argument that feminist regionalism should be understood as a transnational lens in the comparative study of world modernisms, rather than as stuffy localism. I propose that regionalism offers one way to correct the Anglo-American and Anglo-Saxon bias present in some of the current

¹⁶ Significant parts of Finnish Karelia were lost to the Soviet Union during the Winter and Continuation Wars, which took place during the Second World War between 1939 and 1944.

transnational and global modernist scholarship. In the final sections of the fourth chapter, I make a case for this transnational potential of regionalism by broadening my analysis from Olsson's novel to a comparative look at multiple rural texts from American, Swedish, Finnish, and Finland-Swedish modernisms. My hope is to both highlight the plurality and centrality of rural representations in Nordic modernisms and to contrast their handling of intersectional and political issues with those that took place in American regional modernisms.

Throughout my dissertation, I intend to initiate dialogue between multiple fields of inquiry; most importantly, between modernist studies, regional literary studies, and narrative theory, and particularly their intersectional and feminist theoretical turns. By focusing on ethnically, linguistically, and geographically marginal characters and communities, I will continue the scholarly discussions of modernism's varied manifestations, and through a focus on narrative techniques, my dissertation shows how my case studies merge formal experimentation with discussions of the politics of modernity. Without an adequate analysis of rural regions and their minority points of view, we marginalize voices that took part in the artistic world-making of modernity, which further leads to a one-sided conceptualization of the modernist movement. My dissertation tackles this issue by analyzing narrative fiction about minority characters who, despite their peripheral homes, traverse national and linguistic borders, as well as create alternative visions of modern communities.

CHAPTER II

RURAL IMMIGRATION:

NORDIC IMMIGRANTS AND THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN SMALL TOWN

2.1. WHO SEES THE SINGING LARKS?

Thea felt that she was coming back to her own land. She had often heard Mrs. Kronborg say that she “believed in immigration,” and so did *Thea believe* in it. This earth *seemed to her* young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range. Wire fences might mark the end of a man’s pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can. It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang— and one’s heart sang there, too. *Thea was glad* that this was her country, even if one did not learn to speak elegantly there. (*The Song of the Lark* 219-20; emphasis added)

Willa Cather’s 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark* follows the life of Thea Kronborg, the daughter of a Swedish immigrant family, from her early years in the rural small town of Moonstone, Colorado to her later cosmopolitan travels as she transforms into a world-famous opera singer. Central to the novel is Thea’s relationship to the land she lives on and the way in which that relationship is conveyed by the omniscient narrator of the text. As seen in the quotation, the concept of land refers both to the physical landscape around

her as well as to the political land of the United States, a country that harbors immigrant families such as her own. The geographical details of the land and particularly its vast flatness mark not only the possibility of new beginnings for immigrants but seem to even imply a broad-mindedness of spirit for those who settle there. These relationships between region, nation, and immigration are the focus of this chapter as I analyze what function immigrant characters have in modernist representations of the American countryside and whether they are understood as welcome and integral to the continuation of rural areas.

Central to these investigations is the question of voice and the polyphonic nature of novels. In the Bakhtinian tradition, language is understood as a battlefield over meaning-making and the novel genre is seen as an exemplary site of heteroglossic contestation over meaning (Bakhtin 6-8; Steinby and Klapuri 37-54). If regional novels such as Cather's take part in political debates over issues like immigration and minority rights, that partaking takes place precisely through the various voices the narrator and characters establish, as well as through the possible hierarchies between said voices. Therefore, it is central to ask who speaks of and who sees the region, and thus has the power to negotiate regional identity in the novel.

The beginning and ending of the quotation above, for example, are marked with Thea's experience and point of view as she feels, remembers, and contemplates the land around her (marked in italics). But these framing sentences of indirect discourse turn into free indirect in the midst of the paragraph, as the narration zooms out from Thea's personal sensations and memories to a more general evaluation of what the landscape means for "a man" or "one's heart." Who speaks of the singing larks here, and who sees

the borderless, ever-stretching landscape of the country? Here, the point of view seamlessly widens to accommodate for the vast, wide landscape around Thea, while the narration also moves from an individual's experience to a gnomic statement where the exact source of the speaking and seeing becomes blurred.¹⁷

The quotation is thus an example of one of the strategies the omniscient narrator uses throughout the novel. By taking an individual character's experience as the starting point, the narration is able to move into more generalizing statements about the world – seemingly grounded in the individual's perspective but still ascending it to reveal larger authorial concerns. Indeed, one of the most striking features of Cather's novel – and American regional modernism at large, I will argue – is the employment of omniscient narrators who use both implicit and explicit means to articulate their various stances and judgements to the reader. For Cather, these judgments are tied particularly to the novel's discussions concerning immigration and multiculturalism in a modernizing and standardizing America.

This chapter will make a case for Cather's *The Song of the Lark* as a regional modernist novel by analyzing its portrayal of rural regions in relation to political debates of the time, with a particular focus on the novel's omniscience. While the opening passage of Thea looking at the prairie brings to light key points of the following analysis, it also highlights aspects of Cather's writing that have led earlier critics and scholars to deem her as outdated, anti-modern, and anti-modernist. Indeed, to call Cather a regional *modernist* is no straightforward task. After receiving both critical acclaim and popular

¹⁷ Gnomic statements are conventionally defined as those phrases within narratives that express some sort of universal truth or maxim. They are typically framed by free indirect discourse and ambivalent pronominal reference, which means that they are not bound to any one narrative agent or voice in the text (Mäkelä, "The Gnomic Space" 113, 115, 119).

success in the 1920s, Cather's critics in the 1930s and 1940s famously "compiled a 'case against' her by citing nostalgic sentiments in her fiction as evidence of antimodernity" (Wagers 2; see also O'Brien, "Becoming Noncanonical" 110). As Granville Hicks wrote in his 1933 essay, titled "The Case against Willa Cather," Cather "tried, it is true, to study the life that had developed out of the life of the frontier, but she took essentially marginal examples of modern life, symbolic of her own distaste rather than representative of significant tendencies" (710). For commentators such as Hicks, Cather's focus on women, the prairie, and the past "would lead to impotence and ultimately to silence," forcing her to surrender "to the longing for the safe and romantic past" (710).

Such early readings of Cather from the 1930s and 1940s persisted long in scholarship, despite the fact that they reveal perhaps more about the gendering and regionalization of literary debates during Cather's later writing period than about her relationship to modernity and modernism. As Sharon O'Brien has shown, critics during this time period considered Cather "as a 'feminine' writer as they set up a set of metaphoric equivalences: 'feminine,' 'romantic,' 'sentimental,' 'soft,' and 'small,' a circle of associations that led them, seemingly inevitably, from 'woman' to 'minor writer'" ("Becoming Noncanonical" 116). Or, in the words of Guy Reynolds, literary criticism of the time "demonized women's writing and writing about the frontier, thereby damning Willa Cather" (vii). This was part of a larger cultural debate where "certain areas of the national life, for instance the pioneer inheritance and the 'feminisation' of culture, were subject to intense criticism" (Reynolds 3).¹⁸ Cather's early work both

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of how Cather became de-canonized through a small group of influential critics and reviewers in the 1930s and 40s, see O'Brien's "Becoming Noncanonical: The Case against Willa Cather." In addition to the politics of gender, these debates had to do with the politics of class and the emerging generation of Marxist and liberal critics who saw Cather's

focused on prairie life *and* re-wrote the pioneer genre from the perspective of female protagonists, and consequently became negatively coded by many as outdated, domestic, and bourgeois. Not only was her early work effeminated, it was also, in a sense, “ruralized” or “regionalized”:

For [Granville] Hicks the tendencies of modern America are to be found in the urban world, in technology and mass production – the world of Dreiser, Norris and Dos Passos. In contrast, Cather remains a novelist of the frontier, and since American civilisation has shifted from the small-town and agrarian to the urban, industrialised environment, she is inevitably outmoded. (Reynolds 7)

Such critiques are exemplary of the anti-rural tendencies that came to associate the countryside as anti-modern and backward, while urban writing became hailed as both modern and modernist. Thus, an author such as Cather can be deemed outdated not only because of a gendered critique, but also due to the fact that her writing is not urban enough. Such double-marginalization along gendered and regional lines has been discussed at length by Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, whose work attempts to recover women’s regional writing that has long been “feminized and marginalized” due to “the masculinist bias” of American literary histories (43). For Fetterley and Pryse, region is more productively understood not as a geographically determined area but as a discursive phenomenon like that of gender. Whereas the rural regions of local color

writing and interest in the past as examples of her political conservatism, bourgeois humanism, and disdain for the masses (“Becoming Noncanonical” 115-16). Moreover, this was a time period when American literature became increasingly professionalized and masculinized, for example in the institutions of higher education. Women authors like Cather were systematically excluded from the newly emerging canon by scholars and critics who were invested in justifying their own professions and creating an American male literary canon that could compete with that of British literature (118-19).

literature were gendered female, the women authors of such texts were simultaneously regionalized as merely local and, consequently, seen as too marginal to be seriously considered in criticism and scholarship. Though Fetterley and Pryse's work focuses on Cather's predecessors – the local color authors of the nineteenth century – similar processes of evaluation can be found in the early critiques made against Cather. After decades of dismissal, Cather was reclaimed by feminist scholars, who canonized her as both a feminist and as a lesbian/queer author, particularly because of her representations of gender and sexuality.¹⁹

In contrast to the earlier conceptualizations of Cather as antimodern, more recent scholarship has reframed Cather as interested in questions of both modernity and modernism, though from an ambivalent position. Many have noted Cather's ambiguity as stemming from her background: Cather lived through the progressive era and began her career at least ten years prior to most of her modernist peers, making her both an "older generation of modernists" and an emigrant "from a past age, bearing archaic cultural baggage" (Wilson 11). Thus, Cather's relation to modernism and the events that came to define the modernist generation – World War One, Americanization, nativism, etcetera – differs from the more canonized modernists such as Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Consequently, Cather is currently seen as an in-between figure. For

¹⁹ Typically, Cather's writing has been interpreted as feminist because it rejects, for example, traditional sex and gender roles, heteronormativity, marriage plots, biological determinism, as well as male mythologies (see Dyck; Fletcher; Lambert; O'Brien, *Willa Cather*; Moers; Rosowski). Especially her earlier novels with strong female protagonists (such as Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* and Thea in *The Song of the Lark*) have been hailed as feminist, while some scholars have accused Cather of abandoning her feminist politics in her later writing that focuses more on male characters and patriarchal institutions (Acocella 37-38, 100-1; Lambert 680). A particularly heated topic has been Cather's third prairie novel, *My Ántonia*, and the relationship between the male narrator (Jim) and the Bohemian female character Ántonia (Dyck 275). I hope to continue the feminist readings of Cather by shifting focus to her feminist *regionalism*; how she employs the countryside to take part in political debates of her time.

example, Sarah Wilson defines Cather as an “old” modernist, “an ambivalent and contradictory position in a movement characterized by its pursuit of newness” (12), while Melissa J. Homestead and Guy Reynolds characterize Cather as “a writer of transition: she straddled [both] the late-Victorian and modernist eras” (xix). Cather’s own self-conceptualizations add to the ambivalence of her possible modernism/outdatedness; at one point she deemed her fiction uninteresting for anyone under forty years of age (Cather, *Not Under Forty*; Rose 136-37).

This chapter discusses Cather as a modernist not despite of, but because of her interest in the rural and the regional. In the two most recent *Cather Studies* journals devoted to questions of modern/ism in Cather’s work, the regional has been seen as a catalyst that led Cather to modernism. Ann Moseley, John Murphy, and Robert Thacker note how “[t]raveling to the Southwest and then back to Nebraska in 1912 . . . led Cather directly to her modernist awakening” (xviii), while Melissa J. Homestead and Guy Reynolds name *The Song of the Lark* as the novel “most especially critical to Cather’s emergence as a writer of the Southwest, [and] as a modernist” (xviii). While both volumes emphasize the region of the Southwest, with its ancient cliff dwellings and untouched nature, my analysis will focus more on the rural small town setting of Moonstone, Thea’s childhood home, and how it becomes a focal point for discussing the consequences of modernization in the novel.

Cather’s writing has been previously analyzed as modernist either along formal lines or in terms of its content (Millington 52). For example, Cather’s anti-novelistic plotlines and abstract conception of character have been cited as modernist formal elements in her writing, while her focus on twentieth-century experiences such as

migration, Progressivism, and the emergence of consumer culture speak to her modernism on the level of content.²⁰ For my project, both formal and thematic aspects are central when discussing Cather's regional modernism, though I do argue for an expansion to our understanding of what counts as formal experimentation in modernism. Cather emerges here as a modernist because of the way in which her regional texts take part in political debates over the modernizing world, and I will argue that for her early prairie novels, omniscience becomes a tool more suitable for establishing rhetorical authority over issues concerning immigration than the more experimental forms some of her contemporaries employed in their writing.

I will therefore begin my analysis in the following section (2.2.) with a discussion and definition of omniscience, particularly in the context of modernism. I argue for an understanding of omniscience as a rhetorical strategy used by regional authors to claim authority in their texts, and I will juxtapose Cather's engaging omniscient narrator with the more distancing ones her male contemporaries, and particularly Sherwood Anderson, used in their regional writing. Though many regional modernists employed omniscience in their texts, my central argument is that omniscience served differing political purposes, and that there were significant, perhaps gendered differences in the types and styles of omniscient narrators these authors decided to use. This discussion of omniscience functions as a framework throughout the rest of the chapter, since the structuring of

²⁰ For discussions of Cather's modernism that focus on form and style, see Phyllis Rose and Jo Ann Middleton. See also Richard Millington's article that argues for Cather as a modernist author along both formal and thematic lines. In addition to these, Ann Moseley has argued that romanticism turns into modernism in *The Song of the Lark*. Moseley bases her argument on a comparison between the novel's characters and plotline and the "major thinkers of Cather's day (most of whom were romantics themselves) who influenced modernism as a whole—the philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, the early anthropologist Franz Boas, and the composer Richard Wagner" (231).

voices in *The Song of the Lark* will become central to my later interpretations of the political debates the novel takes part in.

In section 2.3., I will turn to look at the various cases that have been made against regional writing both in early twentieth-century literature and public commentary, as well as in later literary scholarship. I will trace these arguments from Cather's predecessors, the local color authors, to her own contemporaries in the "revolt from the village" school, and position Cather's takes on multiculturalism, immigration, and the countryside in relation to other American regional traditions. The point is to both shed light on all the accusations that have been made against regional literature in previous criticism and scholarship – from its alleged backwardness and anti-modernism to nostalgic desires for ethnic homogeneity – as well as to interpret how *The Song of the Lark* responds to political debates of its time through a rural lens, thus complicating the urban bias of much of modernist scholarship.

The final section (2.4.) of this chapter analyzes the relationships between race, region, and empire in *The Song of the Lark*. I will review earlier scholarly debates regarding the role that regional literature has played either as a contributor or as a counterweight to the establishment of a unified American nation and the transnational networks of the modern American empire (Brodhead; Fetterley and Pryse; Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*), and see how these arguments map onto Cather's early prairie novels. My focus will be on the role that the omniscient narrator plays in constructing an image of America as a transnational empire, both by articulating the migratory roots of its immigrant citizens and by focusing on the development of Thea as a product of the country. Throughout *The Song of The Lark*, Thea is racialized by the male characters

around her, both as a Swede through her “milky white” skin and “yellow” hair, as well as a native-like “savage,” making her both a desired exotic other, an ethnically-assimilable immigrant (yet not quite an American), as well as an imagined descendant of Southwestern cliff-dweller peoples. The novel, therefore, negotiates topics of Americanization, the expansion of the U.S. empire, and the future of the American countryside largely through Thea’s immigrant body that becomes both objectified and racialized by the people around her. It is ultimately through migrating, transnational characters like Thea that small towns and rural regions in Cather’s prairie novels become connected to wider processes of urbanization, immigration, and the making of the American capitalist empire.

2.2 OMNISCIENCE AND REGIONALISM: CONSERVATIVE STORYTELLING REQUIRES CONSERVATIVE METHODS?

Since I will entwine modernist and narrative studies throughout the following chapters, it is necessary to begin by addressing the fact that a look at modernism may seem redundant in the context of narrative theory. Classical narratology was largely based on a modernist canon, and this modernist bias has been rightfully criticized, particularly through diachronic and feminist approaches that have moved focus to other time periods and genres.²¹ Though my project does not temporally expand narratological studies but rather continues the classical focus on modernism, it is equally worth noting that the modernist canon of narrative theory has historically been a very limited one. As many feminist

²¹ In the recent edited collection *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser note that, despite intentions to expand previous structuralist canons, even feminist narratology has been too centered on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction (10).

scholars prior to myself have noted, the literature on which classical narratology was based on was – to a large extent – white, middle class, and male. What I want to highlight and add to this critique is the question of region and which locations scholars have seen as central to modernism. One of the major arguments of my project is that regional modernism complicates classical, urban-centered understandings of narrative voice in modernism, for example in the way in which American regional authors often employed omniscient narration in their texts.

Modernist writing has typically been theorized as a movement away from omniscient and reliable narration of the realist tradition towards narration that is marked by subjectivity, fragmentation, and multiple points of view. As Jesse Matz notes in his work on the modernist novel,

Perfect heroes, artificial plots, false endings, and excessive detail were banished from the modern novel, but there was one thing many modern writers were even more eager to rule out: the omniscient narrator. For years the typical narrator had been a detached third-person voice, all-knowing and all seeing, able to tell a perfect story. But in a world of subjective realities, skeptical questions, and false appearances, who could really know everything? (51)

According to this theory, which is shared by both scholars of modernism and narratology alike, modernist formal innovation is characterized with a multitude of voices that are limited and fallible.²² Alongside this turn comes a heightened focus on the

²² Modernist textbooks and general surveys of the movement often point this feature as one of modernism's defining characteristics. The modernist turn from heterodiegetic and omniscient third person narration to texts that host multiple points of view has also been discussed in feminist narratology in relation to issues of community. Susan S. Lanser writes in her seminal work,

interiority of the individual subject, and the falling away of traditional novelistic characteristics such as a coherent plot line. These changes were often explicitly commented on and reflected by the modernist authors themselves in their non-fictional works (Woolf, “Modern Fiction”). Within the Anglo-American tradition, authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner are often cited as the core examples of such narrative innovations. The reason often given for such a formal transformation in literature is the epistemological uncertainty brought on by the modern world, where language no longer conveys shared experience or objective truths. In fact, Brian McHale has famously characterized modernism as being dominated by epistemological questions as opposed to the ontological focus of postmodernist literature (9). As Elise Nykänen explains in her dissertation on Finnish modernism: “Language – both as a tool of fiction-making and of human communication – is no longer conceived as a transparent medium that leads unproblematically to shared worlds. The multiple perspectives are employed to produce the cognitive effect of the loss of the incongruous worlds and the uniform ways of knowing and seeing the world” (22). Such questioning of shared worlds, stability, and the rational subject was, in turn, tied to larger historical changes. The modern world – characterized by the First World War and escalated processes of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration, as well as new theories of relativism ranging from physics to anthropology – brought on new conditions of living and thinking which became further commented upon in the narrative choices of literary authors.

Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice, how modernism, by recognizing multiple perspectives both formally and philosophically, “(re)turns narrative voice from the hegemonic individualism [associated] with the nineteenth century to narrative structures in which two or more characters may constitute a narrating community without suppressing their personal identities” (255).

This line of thinking has been picked up by scholars of contemporary literature, as well. For example, Paul Dawson, in his study of Anglo-American literature from the 1990s onwards, asks “why so many contemporary writers have turned to omniscient narration, given the aesthetic prejudice against this narrative voice which has prevailed for at least a century” (3). Dawson frames his argument with the same idea that the rejection of omniscience originated from and was fostered by modernism. The modernist ideal of a nonintrusive narrator who allows characters’ voices to reign became “entrenched as an aesthetic principle” by the mid-twentieth century (13), thus turning the omniscient narrator of previous centuries “both technically obsolete and morally suspect” (3).

The point of this chapter is to consider American regional modernism – particularly texts written by white authors – as an anomaly to these theories on omniscience and modernism. I would like to suggest that what makes regional modernism’s approach to the issue of modernity so distinct is precisely its common use of omniscient, even authoritative third person narrators who do not fit with traditional and urban-centered ways of understanding narration in modernism.

When we look at, for example, texts ranging from Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), to Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920), Katherine Anne Porter’s *The Old Order* (1955), John Steinbeck’s *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), or Willa Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* (1915), we can find examples of highly individualistic and omniscient narrators. In these regional texts – some more modernist than others – individual and omniscient voices are not substituted for collective ones and instead the texts host, to a varying degree, multiple markers that suggest the textual hierarchy of

voices. The narrators of these texts not only show and describe, but also comment on, evaluate, and judge events and characters, thus elevating their own voice over characters in the debates over region, nation, and modernity. This despite the fact that the texts often have collective protagonists and a focus on the representations of rural communities.

Omniscience itself has typically been defined in epistemological terms; omniscient narrators have been understood as all-knowing and all-seeing entities, sparking debates over their (im)possible godlike properties (Culler; Nelles; Sternberg). In these definitions, the focus is often on a narrator's ability to reveal characters' inner thoughts to readers via consciousness representation. The narrator of *The Song of the Lark* certainly falls under this category of omniscience; as already seen in the opening quotation of this chapter, the narrator has access to Thea's private mind and the ability to render her inner thoughts, judgments, and ideas to readers.

Defining omniscience solely as a matter of focalization and access to consciousness is, however, problematic. Not only does it place *all* so-called third person narrators under the category of omniscience (Dawson 18), but even more importantly it does not explain modernism's chasm with this particular type of narrator. Jesse Matz's previous question – who “could really know everything” in the modern world and the modernist novel – is certainly an epistemological one, but the point of contest is something else than consciousness representation per se. Canonical modernist texts such as Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* do, in fact, host third person narrators who are able to seamlessly move from one character's mind to the other and thus hold the sort of epistemological privilege typically associated with omniscience. Yet, what makes these narrators modernist (and not omniscient) is the fact that they remain silent, invisible, and

non-intrusive, creating an illusion of unmediated access to characters. As Paul Dawson describes,

works of omniscient narration are criticized on aesthetico-moral grounds for overtly asserting an authorial presence in the telling of a story and thus breaking the mimetic illusion, dictating the response of readers, and denying the autonomous selves of characters. In these terms, the authoritative possession of knowledge is less of a concern than the assertion of power through overt rhetorical attempts at influence. (19)

The major epistemological difference between the omniscient narrator of the realist novel and the invisible narrator of the canonical modernist novel is thus not consciousness representation but the narrator's presence on the one hand and, on the other hand, its assertion to propose opinions or truths about human life and the world at large. Omniscient narrators of the realist novel hold a(n epistemologically) privileged position from which to impart ideas about the world – and it is this claim to presence and authority that is deeply contested in canonical understandings of modernism. This leads to the second issue between omniscience and modernism; omniscient narrators often *tell* instead of showing (see Booth). It is precisely this telling, which always requires some form of intrusiveness on behalf of the narrator, that is seen as deeply antagonistic with modernist writing.

That is why it is important to highlight that my understanding of omniscience follows Dawson's method, where omniscience is not merely a matter of knowledge, but rather a matter of personality and rhetoric performance of narrative authority (19). Not only do the narrators of regional American texts have access to characters' embodied

minds and possess the ability to move spatio-temporally as they like, but they are also narrators who establish a personality in their voice, for example through metafictional commentary, evaluation, and judgments. Consequently, the omniscient narrators I analyze here are examples of what Susan S. Lanser terms “authorial voices” – heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential narrators who engage in “extrerepresentational” acts such as reflections, judgments, and generalizations about the world “beyond” the fictional actions being represented (*Fictions of Authority* 15-16). These narrative personalities differ largely between regional texts, from very authoritative and condescending examples to more subtle and communal ones. The omniscient narrator of *The Song of the Lark* is, I will argue, one of the more implicit and communal types, at times drawing attention to its own views and role as a storyteller:

The Kohlers had in their house the most wonderful thing Thea had ever seen— but of that later. (24)

Thea and Mrs. Kronborg had many friends among the railroad men, who often paused to chat across the fence, and of one of these we shall have more to say. (31)

Such little, mean natures are among the darkest and most baffling of created things. There is no law by which they can be explained. The ordinary incentives of pain and pleasure do not account for their behavior. They live like insects, absorbed in petty activities that seem to have nothing to do with any genial aspect of human life. (34)

The first two quotations are examples of metafictional commentary that can highlight the constructed nature of literature. Often, metafictional comments pause the

narration of events to point out the artifice of the text itself and distance the reader from immersion, but in *The Song of the Lark* they rather establish a communal feel to Cather's storytelling. The omniscient narrator does not refer to itself as an "I" or to the reader as a "you," but entwines the teller and listener into a communal "we" that experiences the told events together, thus bringing the reader closer to the story and its characters (cf. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions*). Perhaps even more important to the personality of the novel's omniscient narrator is its ability to present evaluations of specific characters and general personality types – often in the form of gnomic statements. This can be seen in the third quotation, where Doctor Archie's wife is heavily critiqued as an example of mean-natured creatures. Though the omniscient narrator in Cather's novel typically comments on characters in a sympathetic manner in order to elicit empathy from the reader, there are rare occasions such as the example of Mrs. Archie that reveal narratorial condemnation instead.

In the line of rhetorical narratology, what I am interested in is to ask what makes the intrusive and omniscient narrator preferable for some of the authors of the time – in short, what are the purposes and effects of omniscience in texts such as Cather's *The Song of the Lark*? Third person narration is typically associated with reliability and stability; qualities that seem to be lost and heavily critiqued during the era of (urban) modernist innovations. Such a narrative choice could easily be dismissed as merely conservative – especially in the context of countryside representations, since the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed heated cultural debates over the possible backwardness and conformity of rural and small town America.²³ This is a particularly

²³ For scholarly discussions on these debates, see Susan Hegeman and Ryan Poll. In the 1920s, discussions and fears over small town conformity were not only affected by the emergence of

pressing point because literary scholarship has at times associated omniscient narrators precisely with conservative politics. Morton P. Levitt, for example, has argued in *The Rhetoric of Modernist Fiction* that English authors who employed omniscience after the World Wars were reacting against modernist experimentation from a conservative standpoint and consequently wrote some of the “least interesting and effective fiction” of the time (124-5). On a more general level, literary criticism has often understood the development of the novel as a gradual liberation of characters from narratorial control, thus contributing to a prejudice against omniscience (Dawson 23). As Meir Sternberg aptly summarizes, “Since modernism, narrative omniscience has been much attacked, yet little studied and understood” (638).

I hope to push back on these ideas and ask, instead, whether omniscience in regional texts attempts to establish something more positive and inclusive: for example a counter-culture of stability, collectivity, and shared truths at an age that no longer seems to embrace such values. Walter Benjamin argued in his 1936 essay, titled “The Storyteller,” that modernity and modern authorship have eradicated old forms of oral storytelling that bring people together to share knowledge and life experiences in an embodied way. Such concerns over the possible loss of authentic community, communication, and knowledge can also be found in many regional texts of the time as they discuss the dynamics of small towns and other rural communities. Perhaps omniscience is employed in these texts for new means: to reflect on and emphasize the issue of community in modernity. In this light, an omniscient and authorial narrator can

rural sociology and studies such as *Middletown* (1929), but also by the writings of literary authors and critics. As an example, see Jon Lauck’s discussion of Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Main Street* (1920) as a sociological event, bolstered by the conception that Lewis did research and field work in rural states in the manner of an anthropologist (45-8).

be seen to function as a textual replacement for an oral storyteller – as a strong individual voice to whom everyone listens, and who has the power to propose truths about the world and bring individuals together.

Yet, I wonder to what extent this anxiety over a lost community is an issue related to whiteness in the context of early twentieth-century America. The regional texts where I have found the pairing of omniscience with discussions over the possible loss of community are predominantly about white communities, written by white authors such as Anderson, Lewis, and Steinbeck. Thus, it is important to ask why whiteness is often linked with the omniscient voice in this context and what the stakes are for using omniscience in regional texts that focus on ethnic and linguistic minorities, such as the Scandinavian immigrants in novels written by Willa Cather. If omniscient narrators have the ability to propose truths in regional texts, whom do these truths serve? And which authors have the ability to claim cultural and political authority through omniscience in the literary texts of early twentieth century America?

Next, I will begin to answer these questions with a closer look at examples of omniscience in *The Song of the Lark*, with a particular focus on how the narrator's presence and authority emerge over questions of immigration and minority groups. In the beginning of the novel, the Swedish Kronborg family is often looked down upon by the American members of the small town. This causes the protagonist, Thea, to worry about her foreignness, as seen here in a discussion regarding the naming of her new baby brother:

“Thor? Oh, you’ve named the baby Thor?” exclaimed the doctor. Thea frowned again, still more fiercely, and said quickly, “That’s a nice name,

only maybe it's a little— old-fashioned.” She was very sensitive about being thought a foreigner, and was proud of the fact that, in town, her father always preached in English; very bookish English, at that, one might add. (15)

During her childhood years, Thea is concerned with how the rest of the small town perceives the Swedish origin of her family. Language becomes a sign of exclusion or assimilation: her brother's name, Thor, marks him as a foreigner, whereas her father's bookish English is a source of pride as it shows no sign of a Swedish accent.

In contrast to Thea's worries, the omniscient narrator supports the family's immigrant status, not in an extremely overt and didactic manner, but by validating specific figural interpretations. For example, in the following passage, the omniscient narrator describes the family's mother, Mrs. Kronborg, mostly through the eyes of her husband, Peter:

It was her work to keep their [children's] bodies, their clothes, and their conduct in some sort of order, and this she accomplished with a success that was a source of wonder to her neighbors. As she used to remark, and her husband admiringly to echo, she “had never lost one.” With all his flightiness, Peter Kronborg appreciated the matter-of-fact, punctual way in which his wife got her children into the world and along in it. He believed, *and he was right in believing*, that the sovereign State of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her. (12; emphasis added)

Throughout this paragraph, the narration follows quite closely the language and point of view of characters, while the narrator remains largely unobtrusive and hidden. A fleeting moment of intervention happens when the narrator describes how Peter “was right in believing that the sovereign state of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her.” Here, in the passage marked in italics, the narrator uses their authorial voice to verify the husband’s judgment of Mrs. Kronborg as correct and factual and, thus, guides the audience to form an allyship with Mrs. Kronborg – even at a time when the rest of the small town community sees the Swedish family as somewhat strange and foreign.²⁴

In other words, the omniscient narrator uses their authority and artistic craftsmanship to promote the status of immigrant women – or, at least, *Scandinavian* immigrant women – in the construction of America. Instead of being foreigners to the land, immigrant women like Mrs. Kronborg are the builders of it. One could argue that the passage refers, rather, to hard-working, motherly women in general, no matter their origin. However, I think that the question of immigration cannot be erased here,

²⁴ It is worth noting why I refer to Cather’s narrator as “they.” In her early works, Susan S. Lanser has famously argued that readers – often unconsciously – inscribe genders to third person narrators. According to her thesis, also dubbed “Lanser’s rule,” the gender of an otherwise unmarked heterodiegetic narrator typically derives from the gender of the textually inscribed author (*The Narrative Act*). However, due to the authority conventionally given to male voices, the link between the gender of women authors and their omniscient narrators can be overridden. In her more recent work, Lanser has suggested an even queerer lens, where “heterodiegesis becomes the very emblem of gender indeterminacy” as readers refer to nameless, heterodiegetic narrators with a gender-neutral or genderless “it” or “they” (“Toward (a Queerer)” 30).

Intuitively, I have always thought of Cather’s narrator in *The Song of the Lark* as a “she,” especially since I see a significant, gendered difference between Cather’s omniscient narrator and the narrators of her male contemporaries’ texts. Regardless, I will refer to all the heterodiegetic narrators of my case studies with gender-neutral pronouns (“they” and “it”) throughout this project. I find Lanser’s suggestion for gender indeterminacy in classifying narrators not only compelling, but also fitting for my case studies; after all, Cather, Larsen, and Olsson have all been theorized as “queer” and as complicating heteronormative and gender-binary structures in their writing.

particularly since the scene follows after passages that describe the family's Swedish origin and their status in the small town as an immigrant family. Moreover, the question of immigration is linked to white privilege, since the beginning of the novel, particularly through the eyes of Dr. Archie, emphasizes the so-called Scandinavian physique of the mother and her daughter, with an emphasis on their "milky white," "fair" skin (10, 11), "yellow hair," (11) and "Scandianvian face" (10). As Marilee Lindemann has noted, Thea's milky white skin "marks her as the assimilable ethnic, for it signals . . . both a strong physical constitution and the political constitution of the United States, a nation made out of immigrants" (55). Moreover, while the assertion uplifts the status of Scandinavian immigrant women as builders of the land, it simultaneously erases the violent history that led to the possibility of such immigrants taking refuge there. The history of land theft and the genocide of natives, who inhabited the area long before the "sovereign state of Colorado" was established, goes unmarked here.

Another notable feature of omniscient narration and narratorial authority in *The Song of the Lark* is the way in which the novel makes generalizing truths about entire migrant and ethnic communities, as seen, for example, in the following passages:

His wife, Mrs. Tellamantez, was sitting on the doorstep, combing her long, blue-black hair. (Mexican women are like the Spartans; when they are in trouble, in love, under stress of any kind, they comb and comb their hair). (41-42)

There is hardly a German family in the most arid parts of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, but has its oleander trees. However loutish the American-born sons of the family may be, there was never one who

refused to give his muscle to the back-breaking task of getting those tubbed trees down into the cellar in the fall and up into the sunlight in the spring. (26)

There are a number of such instances where the narrator explains to their audience in a didactic manner what communities such as the Mexican or the German ones are like. Characters and their behavior are, thus, explained and interpreted according to their nationality. The point, it seems, is to educate the reader on communities perhaps foreign to her in a benevolent manner; there is no laughing at the customs or traits of various groups of people. Many of these generalizing truths, on behalf of the narrator, focus on the inhabitants of Mexican communities: how they comb their hair, how they prefer to cook outside, et cetera. Though the omniscient narrator attempts to guide their audience to have empathy and understanding for characters that hold marginal positions in society, the narrator's truth-statements have their downsides, too. At least from a twenty-first-century readerly perspective, these authorial comments move between good-hearted embrace and support to didactic stereotypes that rely on the questionable acts of essentializing and exoticizing groups of people that are categorized as foreign.

The authorial power that the narrator has in *The Song of the Lark* is, thus, employed to discuss a number of minority groups in Western and Southwestern America and to show not only their presence but also their input to these regions. In other words, the novel proposes a reading of rural America where minority and immigrant groups are not foreign to such sites but, on the contrary, such sites are fundamentally based on immigrant groups and their work. The omniscient narrator plays a major part in creating such a sense of solidarity with the migrant and minority characters of the text, which

leads me to the question of the relationship between omniscience and readerly empathy/irony.

In his study of modernism in Cather's writing, Richard Millington argues that Cather does not give moralizing plots, teachings, or authoritative truths. According to Millington, as readers of Cather we "do not judge, we witness" (64). Even though this may be true to some extent, such an interpretation misses the implicit, often fleeting moments of narratorial verification and judgment that take place, for example, in *The Song of the Lark*. The narrator does not necessarily state its own opinions in separation from characters' voices, but rather guides the reader to certain ideas and teachings by siding with some characters more than others. In addition to these unobtrusive yet meaningful moments, there are also cases of explicit narratorial intervention and judgment where the narrator's voice takes over. One example of this was the previous, lengthy description of Doctor Archie's wife as one of those mean natures who "are among the darkest and most baffling of created things" (34). This description is quite exceptional, however, because of the negative tone the narrator takes. Even though the novel's narrator does make its own presence and opinions visible instead of merely showing and witnessing, it does so for the most part in a rather empathetic manner that typically sides with the characters it is describing – particularly those characters that hold otherwise marginal positions, for example according to ethnicity or class.

This is how omniscience in Cather's work differs from some of her regional male counterparts writing about the rural West and Midwest during the same time period. A telling contrast to Cather in this sense is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), which shares not only an omniscient narrator and a rural small town milieu with Cather's

novel, but also an interest in the problems of rural communities in the midst of modernization. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, however, the narrator constructs a strict hierarchy between himself and the characters. The narrator, through its omniscience, has superior knowledge and is quite keen on pointing out all the various ways in which the characters it describes make incorrect evaluations and judgments, while the narrator is the one who holds all the (objective) truths:

In Winesburg, Seth Richmond was called the “deep one.” “He’s like his father,” men said as he went through the streets. “He’ll break out some of these days. You wait and see.” . . . He, like most boys, was deeper than boys are given credit for being, but *he was not what the men of the town, and even his mother, thought him to be*. No great underlying purpose lay back of his habitual silence, and he had no definite plan for his life. (72; emphasis added)

The passage starts with a notion that the whole town – which, in the following sentence, is narrowed to the men of the town – seems to agree upon: “In Winesburg” Seth is “the deep one.” The narrator quotes inhabitants’ speech quite at length, only to affirm in the end that Seth was *not* what the town or even his closest family members “thought him to be.” With the same manner that the narrator moves Seth’s subjective mind away from the townspeople, he also moves it closer to his own elevated position. Unlike the other characters, the narrator knows that the imagined depth of Seth’s silence is an illusion, as no “great underlying purpose lay” behind it. Seth himself builds a contrast between public speech and his own silent doing and thinking when he ruminates about the town’s annoying habit to endlessly “talk and talk” while he simply wishes to “work

and keep quiet. That's all I've got in my mind" (76). The narrator, however, is able to go even deeper into Seth's thinking: "He was depressed by the thought that he was not a part of the life in his own town, but the depression did not cut deeply *as he did not think* of himself as at fault." (74; emphasis added). Seth may be aware that his mind is preoccupied with two ideas – those of being quiet and working – but he is not aware of the shallowness of his thoughts and self-recognition. The narrator can, over and over again, point out what Seth himself does not know, realize, or be conscious of; he can comment on all that which is *not* going on in Seth's mind. Thus, the possibility for narrative empathy or mockery steps in as well. The town does not know Seth very well – but neither does Seth – and hence the story and its character, titled "The Thinker," become cast in a tone of irony. The only agent doing much in-depth thinking here is the narrator.

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, the narrator typically presents the town's collective thoughts only to discard them and counter them with how things were "in reality," as seen again in the following: "The Richmond house was built of limestone, and, although *it was said in the village to have become run down*, had *in reality* grown more beautiful with every passing year" (70; emphasis added). The "reality" promoted here is of course the reality and point of view of the heterodiegetic narrator, who can see not only facts, but also make correct psychological and aesthetic judgments, instead of producing mere figural opinions.

Meanwhile, Cather's narrator often validates the ideas of various characters. Similarly to the earlier example, where Peter Kronborg was correct in his evaluation of

Mrs. Kronborg, here the small town inhabitants are right in their collective opinion of Dr. Archie:

Howard Archie was “respected” rather than popular in Moonstone. Everyone recognized that he was a good physician, and a progressive Western town likes to be able to point to a handsome, well-set-up, well-dressed man among its citizens. But a great many people thought Archie “distant,” and they were right. (84)

The omniscient narrator of *The Song of The Lark* gives space for characters’ thoughts and opinions to be heard, and intermittently steps in to validate them as correct (“they were right”). Here, too, the narrator claims authority, but unlike in *Winesburg, Ohio*, that authority is not established through an opposition to lesser-knowing characters, but rather in communal agreement with them. Because of this differing attitude toward characters – antagonism in Anderson versus validation in Cather – the narrators of these two novels bring forth different interpretations even when using similar textual techniques.

As an example, both narrators tend to give short, direct quotations of villagers’ speech; Howard Archie was “respected” and “distant”, while Seth was called the “deep one.” In both cases, the use of quotation establishes some distance between the language of the narrator and that of characters, but in *Winesburg, Ohio* the scare quotes imply a heavier tone of irony. The idea of Seth being called the “deep one” is set into an ironic, laughable light as the narrator moves on to prove how Seth was, in fact, anything but deep. In contrast, the narrator of *The Song of The Lark* takes distance from the villagers’ language through scare quotes, yet continues to side with the content of their opinions

ideologically. All in all, whereas omniscience in *Winesburg, Ohio* is used to mark the hierarchy and difference of knowledge between the narrator and the characters, Cather's narrator uses their authority to agree with the ideas of characters, thus bringing them closer to the reader.

In one of the early canonical works of feminist narratology, *Gendered Interventions*, Robyn Warhol analyzes the reader-addressee relationship and direct address of nineteenth-century novels in order to show how engaging omniscient narrators may elicit reader's empathy and provoke them to take social action. Warhol argues that Victorian female novelists used direct address in their novels to engage their readers and take part in political debates that were otherwise unavailable to them in the public sphere of the time. Meanwhile, contemporaneous male authors' use of direct address had a distancing effect that rather pointed out to the readers the constructed, artistic nature of the literary text itself (*Gendered Interventions*; "Toward a Theory" 811-15).

Though my focus here is not on direct address but rather on narrator-character relations, there seems to be a significant, perhaps gendered difference in the types of readerly engagement and distance that Cather's and Anderson's omniscience provokes. Anderson's strict hierarchy of voices highlights the novel's representation of the majority of the small town characters as rather pitiful; as characters modernity has left behind, unable to evaluate their own situation, with nothing that can be done to save them anymore. The omniscient narrator's tone in *Winesburg, Ohio* is not only very hierarchical, but also quite metafictional; it is the narrator's task and duty to construct a community of stories out of characters who share no communal feeling with one another. Thus, the narrator becomes the master storyteller of the "grotesques" it describes.

Cather's narrator, in contrast, avoids overt metafictional commentary and gives more agency and hope for her rural characters, creating more of a sense of community between the reader and the characters.

If Cather's and Anderson's texts represent two opposing styles of regional modernist omniscience – one engaging and the other distancing – for what purposes are such differing styles employed? By asking this question, I want to evoke the previous, broader issue of employing omniscience in the first place; for what purposes is omniscience used in American regional modernism? What I hope to argue in the remainder of this section is that regional omniscient narration of early-twentieth century should not be equated with the “sage-knower of human nature and guide to ethical conduct” that characterizes nineteenth century omniscient narrators (Dawson 14). Rather, omniscient narrators in regional works could perhaps be better characterized as a type of ethnographic or sociological *guide* to the region under scrutiny, participating in the sociological and anthropological turns of the time period.²⁵ The reason why the tone and style of these narrator-guides differs is that the texts offer very different interpretations of said regions and the effects of modernity on rural America.

²⁵ The turn of the century witnessed the emergence of sociology and anthropology as independent scholarly fields, changing the way Americans understood concepts such as “progress,” “culture,” and “civilization.” For scholarly discussions on these developments and their relation to American modernisms, see Eric Aronoff's and Susan Hegeman's work. Cather was interested in the revolutions taking place in social sciences (Reynolds 16), and scholars have even defined her narrative voice as “anthropological.” For example, Richard Millington argues that Cather's interest in “cultures rather than Culture, what has often been regarded as ‘nostalgia’ or ‘escapism’ in Cather's work . . . is better understood as an ‘anthropological’ interest in the ways people have constructed meaning in particular places at particular times” (59). In his analysis of *O, Pioneers!*, Guy Reynolds calls Cather's tone that of a “local historian” and notes how “[t]he narrating voice is pitched between easy familiarity and careful distance – she mimes amused intimacy and anthropological curiosity . . . [she creates] an enquiring, annotating authorial voice. Yet there is also an ironic, amused knowingness to her writing; the distance never hardens into sneering” (66-67). Reynolds' description of the narrator as both knowing and authorial, yet familiar and never sneering comes close to the engaging style I analyze in *The Song of the Lark*.

In what follows, I will deepen the comparative analysis of Anderson's and Cather's narrative style to explain what type of narrator-guide and interpretation of rural America the texts evoke. Furthermore, in using the term "guide", I have in mind Georg Lukács' critique of modernist art and Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of modern fiction. Lukács famously preferred the realist novel over modernism, because the latter's technical experimentation seemed dangerous as it "undermined the significance and transformative potential of human action" (Barnard 41; Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," "Narrate or Describe"). More specifically, while the modernist author who often uses experimental points of view is caught up "in a flux of emotions, memories, and sense perceptions," the traditional omniscient narrator, who deploys the retrospective vantage of the past tense, is "able to provide the reader with a sense of the overall direction and significance of the action" (Barnard 41). For Lukács, the omniscient narrator is not a conservative and reactionary force as later theorists of modernism have suggested, but rather a necessary guide and interpreter that brings significance to the story at hand. In this sense, Lukács' idea of the omniscient narrator resembles Benjamin's theorization of the pre-capitalist storyteller, who was able to convey experience and significance to her listeners. For Benjamin, however, the modern novel (no matter its genre or narrative style) is no longer able to impart such significance, as true experience has been lost with the rise of a information economy and the solitary task of novel-writing and novel-reading in modernity. It is these partly complementary and partly conflicting takes on modern narration that I will consider in the following conclusion for this section, starting with Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

In the second story of *Winesburg, Ohio*, titled “Paper Pills,” the narrator of the sequence describes the twisted little apples left behind in the Winesburg orchards and their uniqueness and sweetness that only a few can understand: “One nibbles at them . . . one runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled, twisted apples . . . Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples” (14). This description can be seen as a metafictional commentary on the narrator’s task to value the forgotten and twisted citizens of an old rural area; to run from “tree to tree,” character to character, and offer a portrayal of the forgotten ones left behind by modernity for an audience that is already removed from such characters and regions. The comment elevates the narrator to a status above others, as he belongs to the “few” who can understand the authenticity of the apples and show their true depth, that which is hidden inside, to a more modern and perhaps urban readership. This framing of *Winesburg, Ohio* – as a text that reaches beyond the surface – continues the novel’s pattern of metafictional comments that often focus on the importance of knowing and revealing the private thoughts of (rural) characters, of going deeper within.²⁶

The text does, in fact, continuously make claims about the importance of reaching towards an authentic and private experience. It is the narrator’s (or author’s) task to reveal from his elevated position something hidden and true, something perhaps lost in the midst of modernity, urbanization, and the development of capitalism. By explicitly addressing its modern readers, by establishing itself as a separate “I” in the text, and by

²⁶ Anderson even dedicated *Winesburg, Ohio* to his mother, “whose keen observations on the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives.” In fact, the text has often been characterized and studied through its strong focus on individual interiority. For instance, Arnold Weinstein, in his study of Anderson’s style, continuously notes how the text shares “one’s unsharable inner life” (94) and gives “unforgettable instances of what thinking looks like” (96).

providing metafictional commentary on what the stories are about and how they should be read, the narrator establishes its position as a writer and a storyteller through a number of stylistic choices and guides the reader in understanding the stories according to the narrator's intentions.²⁷

This elevated position, however, also creates a distance between the narrator and the "twisted apples" (14) it claims to understand and reveal to its readers. This can be seen perhaps most crucially in the text's internal focalization, and more specifically in the lack of free indirect discourse (FID). As famously theorized in classical narratology, what distinguishes free indirect discourse from other forms of consciousness representation is its ability to blur the lines between narrators and characters; FID gives the omniscient narrator a chance to use a character's own idiom without clearly establishing whether the private thoughts and views expressed are those of the character or the narrator (Cohn, *Transparent Minds* 112).

In *Winesburg, Ohio*, the narrator's decision to represent its characters' interiority exclusively in direct and indirect discourse has, therefore, major consequences both in terms of form and content. Firstly, the use of these discourses ensures that even on a formal level there is a clear line drawn between the apples and their picker – between the characters and their narrator. The narrator establishes itself on a higher level and keeps itself linguistically separated from the characters and their language; there is no

²⁷ The narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio* situates itself and its modern reader as later generations by explaining historical context: "It will perhaps be somewhat difficult for men and women of a later day to understand Jesse Bentley. In the last fifty years a vast change has taken place in the lives of our people" (34). The narrator also establishes itself as a separate "I" and comments on narrative tempo: "I go too fast. Not everything about Wash was unclean." (64). Finally, the narrator provides metafictional commentary and addresses the reader: "It is important to get that fixed in *your* mind. The story of Enoch is in fact the story of a room almost more than it is the story of a man" (92; emphasis added).

confusion, so typical in texts that use free indirect discourse, over whether the thoughts the reader encounters are the narrator's or not. Secondly, the use of direct and indirect discourse means that the text does not reveal the unconscious, most private, and perhaps authentic thoughts and emotions that are often conveyed through free indirect discourse. The critical and hidden remain unexpressed, questioning the narrator's intention and ability to reach the true and the authentic. What happens, in fact, is precisely slight "nibbling" and "running" (14) from one apple and character to another. The authenticity claimed to exist in the rotten apples is left on surface-level; the narrator refuses to get mixed with the sweetness, and instead keeps a distance.

Perhaps it is indeed the narrator's ability to look at the twisted apples from afar that gives the impression of their sweetness. Winesburg becomes the already-gone world of nostalgia, and the narrator invites its reader to look at the outcasts that modernity has left behind. The characters' isolation and loneliness in *Winesburg, Ohio* have traditionally been analyzed in these terms as a symptom of the modern world. Anderson's text has been understood to paint a picture of how a small town roughly 30 years prior to the novel's writing time is losing its sense of the authentic and the collective. Thomas Yingling, for example, has analyzed the (lack of) relationships in the novel as a result of the alienating nature and material conditions of capitalist modernity (106-7). Yingling's Marxist analysis draws from Walter Benjamin's ideas on the disappearance of storytelling to eloquently show how *Winesburg, Ohio* marks the end of collectivity in our modern world.

Indeed, Benjamin's thoughts on the death of storytelling culture and the rise of information resonate strongly with the views of the novel's narrator. In *Winesburg, Ohio*,

the omniscient narrator uses its authority to take a clear stance towards modern relations, as seen in the following instances where the narrator explicitly describes the scenery and effects of the modern, urban world:

They [the apples] have been put in barrels and *shipped to the cities* where they will be eaten in apartments that are *filled with books, magazines, furniture, and people*. (14; emphasis added)

In our day a farmer standing by the stove in the store in his village has his *mind filled to overflowing with the words of other men*. The *newspapers and the magazines* have pumped him *full*. Much of the old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence is gone forever. (34; emphasis added)

As both quotations emphasize, modernity *fills*; it fills spaces with too many people and things, while minds get “pumped full” (34) with the ideas and words of others. What is significant here is the movement that takes place between the modern city and the rural past. Not only do the majority of people and apples get “shipped to the cities” (14) – while only the very few, twisted, and sweet ones are left in Winesburg – but, in addition, the sweet leftovers are hit by modernity as ideas travel through newspapers and magazines, filling their minds “with the words of other men” (34).

It is significant that a text that so clearly shows the isolation and loneliness of the sweet, twisted characters left in Winesburg takes such a critical stance against a modern form of *collective* experience and connection. Instead of seeing the traveling thoughts and words as a chance for communication between characters – although in a more mediated form, through newspapers and magazines – this type of connectivity is portrayed as a

threat, not as a possibility. It is precisely the replacement of embodied sharing with meaningless information that Benjamin laments in his essay, and that is echoed in Anderson's text on the other side of the Atlantic twenty years prior. The words that the inhabitants of Winesburg hear through magazines and newspapers show how immediate storytelling and experience-sharing has been replaced by mediated bits of information.

Unlike Lukács' positive take on the omniscient narrator of the realist novel, Benjamin's understanding of modern fiction sees novel-writing as already too alienated to be able to share true guidance or significance for individual readers. In a way, the narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio* is the lonely storyteller of the capitalist information era that can only form a sense or illusion of community through artistic craftsmanship. The narrator claims to show (the ruin of) the authentic individuals left behind in a world that is turning inauthentic, yet refuses to dig deep down into this authenticity and instead stays at the surface-level it so despises in its own contemporary culture. Meanwhile, the citizens in Winesburg are unable to evaluate their own interiority or recognize the interiority of others, but this seems to have been a long-existing condition. There is no proof given of a previous, better time of authenticity, collectivity, and understanding. Thus, the rural small town of Winesburg is not the last site of community and connection that have become lost, but in quite a contradictory way, the site where loss and disconnection are already so emphasized that they form a need for the artistic creation of community via the omniscient narrator.

In conclusion, the omniscient narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio* becomes an artistic guide to a location and time that both the narrator and its readers are already removed and alienated from. There is something about rural America that has been lost and that cannot

be fully recovered even through art. Thus, the narrator keeps its distance to the characters it describes and emphasizes its own voice as a separate, higher artistic creator and commentator.

In contrast to the somewhat sentimental and bleak vision of the Midwest in Anderson's text, Cather's novel takes quite a different approach to its rural subject. At one point, the narrator in *The Song of the Lark* explicitly ponders what makes a good storyteller by commenting on the storytelling skills of Ray, one of the central characters of Moonstone: "Ray had a collection of good stories. He was observant, truthful, and kindly— perhaps the chief requisites in a good storyteller" (50). I wonder if this sentence functions not just as a description of Ray but, simultaneously, as an implicit metafictional comment on how the narrator of the novel is or hopes to be. Observant and truthful in their omniscience, yet simultaneously kind to the characters being portrayed. It is this description that I want to further elaborate on to illuminate how Cather's narrative style offers a different version of regional omniscience, and consequently a different reading of the present and future of rural America.

Firstly, the notion of "truthfulness" in storytelling relates to the conflict between modernism and omniscience. The traditional account against omniscience in modernist scholarship critiques the idea of authors or narrators being able to claim universal truths or ideals. As Dean Krouk explains in his account on Norwegian modernism, a key part of [European] modernism was the decoupling of literature from "idealistic ethics and politics," as modernism disposed of the idea that the task of the author is to "guide, uplift, and equip us with weighty normative ideals to live by" (46). My argument is, however, that while Cather and other regional modernists may guide or even uplift audiences, they

are not imposing universal truths or normative ideals to live by. Rather, their narrative omniscience is a matter of social and political commentary. The ideas that these narrators bring forth are opinions and beliefs, not claims to universal authority. Thus, the focus is on being “truthful” in one’s storytelling, rather than on telling “the truth”; omniscience in Cather is used to guide the reader instead of establishing singular truths.

The “kindly” nature of Ray’s storytelling also warrants some commentary, because it pinpoints the omniscient narrator’s engaging style in Cather’s novel. While both the narrator and the characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* seem unable to mediate experience anymore, *The Song of the Lark* is still heavily invested in attempting to convey and validate the experiences of characters. This is particularly true of those characters that are in some ways marginal or easily dismissed in society. Previously I gave examples of cases where the characters in question belong to an ethnic minority, but the narrator shows similar sympathies when it comes to, for example, the topic of class:

In the part of Moonstone that lay east of Main Street, toward the deep ravine which, farther south, wound by Mexican Town, lived all the humbler citizens, the people who voted but did not run for office. The houses were little story-and-a-half cottages, with none of the fussy architectural efforts that marked those on Sylvester Street. They nestled modestly behind their cottonwoods and Virginia creeper; their occupants had no social pretensions to keep up. (31-32)

When describing the “social classifications of Moonstone,” the narrator keenly perceives how the rural small town is divided into various neighborhoods along class lines and comments on the “topographical boundaries” (31) that separate one area from

another. Instead of taking a neutral stance in the description, the narrator moves on to guide readerly empathy towards the lower class: these are the “humbler” citizens free from “social pretensions” or “fussy efforts” to impress others, living a modest and admirable life.

In addition to engaging readers with the characters in an empathetic manner, the narrator in *The Song of the Lark* does not seem to be temporally or geographically removed from the region it portrays in the same manner as Anderson’s narrator is.²⁸ In fact, the narrator in Cather’s novel at times refers to its readers in first person plural to establish them as a community that is a part of the American West. In one such example, the narrator explains to its audience how in older countries “dress and opinions and manners are not so thoroughly standardized as in *our own West*” (66; emphasis added). Cather’s writing thus reminds me of Sandra Zagarell’s analysis of nineteenth-century women’s regional writing, which she classifies as a genre of “narratives of community.” The authors and texts that Zagarell studies – such as Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) – are typically classified as “local color” literature written predominantly by white, middle class women. Zagarell, however, chooses the term “narratives of community” to highlight the communal aspects of these texts. According to Zagarell, in this genre the narrator’s double role as outside-observer and inside-participant produces a “combined analysis and empathy [that] counteract tendencies to sentimentalize such communities or dismiss them and [instead] encourage the kind of serious engagement through which community itself might be resuscitated” (517).

²⁸ Indeed, the style of Cather’s narrator is quite opposing to all the characteristics I described with regard to Anderson’s narrator; for example, Cather’s narrator does *not* call itself an “I” in the text, avoid free indirect discourse, or employ overt metafictional commentary.

Though Cather's narrator is omniscient and heterodiegetic – and thus far more removed from the storyworld than the first-person character-narrators of earlier local color literature – the narrator's engagement with the characters brings both the reader and the narrator closer to the subjects and the region under scrutiny. Instead of the sentimental or dismissive take on rural communities showcased in texts like *Winesburg, Ohio*, I would argue that Cather's novel is highly invested in the type of serious engagement that Zagarell describes, where community itself “might be resuscitated” through the act of narration (517). In short, Cather's omniscience and take on regional modernism in her early prairie novel(s) shows hope for rural America and is more invested in its minor and marginal occupants than some of her male contemporaries. Perhaps Cather's prairie writing still sees cultural potential and inspiration in the rural, whereas in Anderson's critique of the modern world, the countryside has already become too infiltrated by conformist and mediated aspects of a capitalist culture.

While analyzing the different styles of regional modernist omniscience in this section, I have mentioned some of the major regional traditions both preceding and taking place simultaneously with Cather's writing; namely, the local color tradition of authors like Jewett, and the revolt from the village tradition of, for example, Sherwood Anderson. In the following sections, I will expand my discussion and comparison of these takes on rural America by analyzing how they have represented the relations between region, cultural standardization, and empire – and I will pay particular attention to what role ethnic and migrant communities have had in such portrayals. These topics have been widely discussed and debated in American scholarship, and I will continue to consider the question of narration as I engage with previous theorizations on the role that literary

representations of the countryside play in imagining the national and transnational frameworks of the United States. As Roland Barthes famously argued, third-person (omniscient) narration can be an effective ideological tool used to naturalize certain discourses via literary fiction. In his own study, Barthes looked at classical nineteenth-century novels that employ third-person narration in order to naturalize their bourgeoisie interests and world-views by representing them as universal truths (Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*; see also Marcus 47).²⁹ In this section, I have analyzed the benevolent and sympathetic ways in which Cather's narrator directs readerly empathies in order to establish the status of immigrants in the making of America, but it is important to ask what discourses and worldviews get naturalized and hidden in the process. Is *The Song of the Lark* and its omniscient narration an attempt to naturalize a vision of America as a multicultural, immigrant-fueled empire, or does the novel offer possibilities for countering and complicating such hegemonic discourses?

2.3. STANDARDIZED SMALL TOWNS AND IMMIGRANT FLAT LANDS: CATHER VERSUS THE MANY CASES AGAINST REGIONALISM

Willa Cather's works have often received mutually conflicting interpretations; her writing has been studied as both conservative and queer, progressive and modernist, nativist and anti-assimilationist, imperialist and counterhegemonic, as well as nostalgic and forward-looking, to name just a few of the dominant debates surrounding her writing. As Kelley

²⁹ As Amit Marcus explains, Barthes furthermore "argues that the authority of the omniscient narrator serves this purpose much better than a first person narrator would, since the latter's system of beliefs and values is perceived by the reader from the outset as subjective and therefore disputable" (47). Susan S. Lanser has made a similar point in distinguishing between authorial and personal voices; authorial voices "conventionally carry an authority superior to that conferred on characters, even on narrating characters" since authorial, heterodiegetic narrators exist outside the fiction and are not humanized by its events (*Fictions of Authority* 16).

Wagers notes, “Cather’s treatments of historical subjects and methods have long served to advance radically opposed critical perspectives” (107). Part of the difficulty of categorizing Cather comes from the fact that she defies easy generational definitions; her writing career spanned the first decades of the twentieth century, and her novels’ themes and forms changed in the course of that time period, as Cather’s world was shaken by major political events from the rise and fall of Progressivism to the First World War, the massive influx of immigrants into the U.S., and the evolving debates over Americanization and nativism.

Similarly, the role of the countryside in Cather’s novels has been understood in conflicting ways, and often these interpretations are entwined with the larger debates over whether Cather’s texts (and consequently their portrayed regions) offer counterhegemonic potential, are examples of nostalgic, anti-modern longing, or help appraise and establish the American empire. It is worth noting that such debates are not unique to Cather but, in fact, have a long tradition in scholarly accounts over regional writing in the United States, starting with nineteenth-century local color literature and moving on to the different regional movements of the early twentieth century. This section will, therefore, discuss various definitions of regional writing in order to shed light on how countryside representations have been understood in the American context, and to make a case for Cather’s regionalism as critical and feminist, rather than as reactionary or conformist. By discussing immigration, minority rights, and the making of trans/national communities through a rural lens, Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* complicates some of the typical critiques previous scholarship has made against regional writing.

To begin with, perhaps one of the most significant contributors to the neglect of rural studies in modernist scholarship is the conceptualization of the rural (and consequently of regional literature) as something that is backward, outdated, and anti-modern. This argument has been prominent in studies concerning nineteenth-century regional literature that is characterized by a focus on local cultures, customs, and dialects, often in rural small town settings. Such regional, or local color, texts have been theorized along anti-modern and backward lines, for example in the research of Richard Brodhead, who writes that regionalism “requires a setting *outside the world of modern development*, a zone of *backwardness* where locally varied folkways still prevail. Its characters are ethnologically colorful personifications of the different humanity produced in such *non-modern* cultural settings” (115-16; emphasis added). Regionalism, as theorized here, is seen as literature about geographically and culturally enclosed communities, outside the temporality of modernization and often with a focus on nostalgic longing. As Kelsey Squire has noted, Brodhead’s

definition demonstrates a clear shift in the American cultural understanding of place as terms like “backward,” “antimodern,” “rural,” and “past” become entangled (and in some cases, synonymous). The additional link between these terms and regionalism leads critics to misconstrue the term, for to invoke a region (especially one that features rural places) evokes assumptions of backwardness and antimodernism.

(47)

In her discussion of literary regionalism’s definitions, Squire traces the origins of traditional accounts of regionalism back to Hamlin Garland, who suggests in *Crumbling*

Idols (1894) that “local color in the novel means that it has such quality of texture and back-ground that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native” (64). In addition to this focus on nativity and locality, however, Garland also emphasizes – in stark contrast to later scholarly allegations of backwardness – that regionalism is concerned with modern and present-day questions. According to Garland, local color authors “are rooted in the soil. They stand among the cornfields and they dig in the peat-bogs. They concern themselves with *modern and very present* words and themes” (59; emphasis added). Interestingly, while “Garland helped through his criticism and his fiction to establish the association between regionalism and rural places filled with soil and cornfields,” his insistence that regional literature confronts present-day social concerns remains largely forgotten (Squire 46).

Contra Brodhead’s critique, feminist scholars such as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have attempted to recover women’s regional writing and debunk accusations of its insularity and backwardness.³⁰ Fetterley and Pryse argue that regionalism has been effeminized and therefore marginalized in literary histories and scholarship, often in opposition to more male-dominated genres such as naturalism and realism (42-55). Eric Sundquist has made a similar point, explaining how “economic or political power can itself be seen to be definitive of a realist aesthetic, in that those in

³⁰ Judith Fetterley’s review of Brodhead’s *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993) is quite telling of their opposing stances on regional literature. Fetterley states that she protests “the conceptual framework of *Cultures of Letters*, for it does the cultural work of dismantling gender as a category of analysis in order to further a gender-based agenda – namely, the production of a ‘new’ nineteenth-century American literary history that takes seriously only the work of male writers” (400). Fetterley further critiques Brodhead’s implication that regionalism was such low literature that it allowed even women to become authors: “Requiring only the knowledge one might have from living in ‘some cultural backwater,’ regionalism turned marginality into a literary asset and so ‘provided the door into literary careers for women’ (p.117)” (399).

power (say, white urban males) have been more often judged ‘realists,’ while those removed from the seats of power (say, Midwesterners, blacks, immigrants, or women) have been categorized as regionalists” (503). Once a text becomes categorized as “regional,” it can further be dismissed as (too) local, insular, backward, domestic, or outdated.

For Fetterley and Pryse, the solution is to redefine regionalism as a form of women’s writing that offers political critique and social commentary. In their conceptualization, regional texts “reveal regions themselves to be discursive constructions, and ultimately critique the commodification of regions in local color as a destructive form of cultural entertainment that reifies not only the subordinate status of regions but also hierarchical structures of gender, race, class, and nation” (6). Thus, regional texts are ones “where region becomes mobilized as a tool for critique of hierarchies based on gender as well as race, class, age, and economic resources” (14). Instead of being outdated or focused on nostalgic longing for a past time and space, regional texts in the feminist, critical sense of the term are very much entwined with the politics of their day.³¹

Fetterley and Pryse’s emphasis on the intersections of oppression and particularly on the racial implications of regionalism is significant, because it highlights and anticipates a second major critique often made against regional texts; namely, their desire for ethnic homogeneity. According to this argument, the nostalgic longing for the past in regionalism is not free of historical or political implications, but in fact serves

³¹ Kelsey Squire notes how Fetterley and Pryse’s understanding of regionalism therefore “captures [Hamlin] Garland’s vision of regionalism as a social and political commentary on present and pressing issues facing common Americans” (47).

contemporary interests. As Brodhead states, “Regionalism’s representation of vernacular cultures as enclaves of tradition insulated from larger cultural contact is palpably a fiction . . . its public function was not just to mourn lost cultures but to purvey a certain story of contemporary cultures and of the relations among them” (121). More specifically, the fictional past and imagined insular communities of regional texts serve to create fantasies of ethnic and cultural homogeneity during a time of intense diversification and urbanization in the U.S. According to Roberto Dainotto, regionalism is based on “perfect and communal living, where social divisions are pastoralized” (30), and this fantasy is as much a resistance against “foreign races” as it is against modernization and industrialization at large (172). This leads Dainotto to ask whether regionalism is “merely the symptom of our present anxiety in facing a multicultural world” (23).

Like Fetterley and Pryse, Dainotto extends his criticism beyond regional literature to consider regionalism as a scholarly framework. And yet, their views offer the opposite ends when it comes to definitions of regionalism and bring to light the larger conflicts within the field. For Dainotto, despite regional theory’s attempt to replace the framework of the nation-state, both regionalism and nationalism depend on cultural homogeneity and the insistence on the unity of land and people (20). Meanwhile, Fetterley and Pryse distinguish regionalism as literature that effectively questions, complicates, and works against hierarchies of race and ethnicity as well as against essentializing views of land and its peoples. Though there certainly are authors who couple rural and small town settings with nostalgic longing and conformist, nationalist, and racist forms of thinking (often for the consumption of urban, outsider audiences), they should not be categorized as the type of feminist and critical regionalism that Fetterley and Pryse advocate.

While these scholarly debates over regionalism's status have often focused on nineteenth-century local color literature and authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Kate Chopin, Mark Twain, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, similar discussions over regionalism's possible outdatedness, insularity, and connections to nativism emerged during the early twentieth century when Cather and other authors contributed to a new wave of regionalism. As Tom Lutz explains, the "1910s, 1920s, and 1930s would see a new burst of regional writing, including Willa Cather's work, that of the writers in the 'revolt from the village' school . . . the Southern Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance, the folklore movement, the 'new regionalism' in social thought, and popular writing and film that explored (or exploited) regional cultures" (99). Consequently, though the local color tradition began to fade by the turn of the century, regional writing and debates over the countryside did not.

Although "region" was understood differently in each of the new schools and arguments that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century – whether as a large geographical entity like 'the South', a smaller political area such as an individual state, or a cultural grouping based on race, ethnicity, religion, class, etcetera (Lutz 101) – what united many of the movements was their focus on the "centuries-long transformation of this [American] country from a rural, frontier, decentralized, producerist, farm and village society – the older America – into the modern, commercialized, consumerist, and mechanized mass society of the metropolis" (Dorman xi). For the revolt from the village authors, whom I discussed in the previous section through Sherwood Anderson, this transformation of the U.S. led to a need to question the rural small town representations of the previous local color tradition. Texts such as Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio*, Sinclair

Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), and Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* (1914) subverted the nation's ideological identification with the dominant village imaginary in order to highlight the dark features of small-town living (Poll 39). What emerged was a notion of the American rural small town as something that is anti-modern, backward, and consumed by conservatism, traditionalism, and the threat of cultural standardization.³²

The trope of the backward countryside has thus been solidified both by the revolt authors (who were predominantly men), as well as by scholars of nineteenth-century regionalism. While the revolt tradition attacked the backwardness of rural and small town America, it also lent itself to the type of ethnic homogeneity that earlier local color authors have been accused of. Texts such as *Winesburg, Ohio* could be analyzed, following Dainotto, as arguing "fiercely against our unhappy civilization, against this polluted industrial present of ours, and long[ing] for what 'used to be'" (19), typically with a focus on ethnically homogenous white communities. But how do these arguments – both about regionalism's outdatedness and ethnic homogeneity – apply to Cather's early novels that were published in between the local color and revolt traditions?

Cather's writing has certainly been accused of both outdatedness and racial prejudice. As noted earlier, she was critiqued quite harshly during her own time period in a manner similar to the gendered critique nineteenth-century regional female authors have received. Cather's texts were seen as too prairie- and frontier-centered, too domestic, and too historic for the modern world. Later scholars, particularly Alfred Kazin and Walter

³² This understanding of the countryside was not only established through regional authors but also by major literary critics of the time. It was, in fact, Carl Van Doren who coined the "Revolt from the Village" tradition and made a case against all things rural and regional through his writings as a critic and cultural commentator. For a history and a politicized critique of the revolt tradition, see Lauck.

Benn Michaels, have further associated Cather's retreat into the past as speaking to her practice of nativism which is, in the words of Kelley Wagers, "the use of historical subjects to reclaim or invent an American origin . . . that [has been seen] as definitive of US literary modernism" (106; Kazin 257; Michaels 2). Particularly Cather's representations of native peoples in the prairie trilogy, of the blind, black pianist D'Arnault in *My Ántonia* (1918), of Jewish characters particularly in *The Professor's House* (1925), and of African-American characters in her final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), have received a great deal of criticism for furthering racial stereotypes and attitudes.³³

For others, however, Cather was neither trapped in the past nor a nativist. Marilee Lindemann argues that Cather's early prairie texts "constitute anything but escapism, for they lay bare the operations of an eroticized and racialized nationalism through a process of restless and ambivalent interrogation" (7). According to Lindemann, Cather's early writings do not function as an emblem of the lost glories of America's pioneer past, but as an unstable "staging ground for several impossible struggles: between immigrant and native-born, the illicitly sexual and the erotophobic, the effeminate male and the too-powerful female, the home-wreckers and the nation-builders" (31).

These debates over racial and ethnic representation illuminate one example of how difficult it has been for scholars to unanimously categorize Cather as one thing or another. In her analysis of Cather's *My Ántonia*, Sharon O'Brien suggests a helpful decoupling of race from ethnicity in these discussions, arguing that "[w]hen the focus is on ethnicity and the debate over Americanization in the early twentieth century, the novel

³³ See, for example, Toni Morrison's illuminating, wonderful analysis of representations of whiteness and blackness in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (*Playing in the Dark* 18-28).

appears as liberatory and progressive; when the focus is on race, the novel becomes less emancipatory and more revealing of conservative, indeed racist, cultural attitudes” (O’Brien, “Introduction” xxi).³⁴ Additionally, since Cather’s writing changed over time, it is necessary to highlight that the arguments that scholars make with regards to ethnicity and race in some of her novels are not necessarily directly applicable to her other writings. While my following analysis does not argue that Cather’s writing is racially progressive, I do agree with Lindemann that Cather’s prairie in her early novels is a political site that complicates and questions struggles and dichotomies between various ethnic and minority groups, for example between immigrants and native-born Americans. Moreover, I would argue that the immigrant and the foreign are central to Cather’s conceptualization of rural America in *The Song of the Lark*, although not as the nativist threat that Michaels suggests.³⁵

³⁴ A similar decoupling can be made with regards to *The Song of the Lark*, which is rather progressive when describing ethnic minorities such as Nordic immigrants. On the other hand, a decoupling of race and ethnicity from a twenty-first-century perspective is also problematic, because these concepts were understood differently during Cather’s writing time in early twentieth-century America. Minority groups from Italian-Americans to Bohemians and Northern Europeans were not seen as only culturally and linguistically different but were also raced and racialized at the time. Consequently, many of these groups faced both institutional discrimination as well as cultural prejudices and biases.

³⁵ As Stuart Burrows quite aptly summarizes; “For rather than perceiving the foreign as a threat, as Michaels suggests, the protagonists of Cather’s novels are mostly either foreigners themselves or the immediate descendants of foreigners” (44). For direct critiques of Michaels’ nativist argument, see, for example, Wagers and Burrows. See also Reynolds, whose analysis of *O Pioneers!* makes a case for Cather as an anti-nativist author (58, 67).

Interestingly for the study at hand, Marilee Lindemann argues against Michaels by focusing on Cather’s early (prairie) novels: “In canonizing Cather as ‘nativist modernist,’ Michaels ignores Cather’s first five novels and implies that all resistance to assimilation is racially motivated” (67). According to Lindemann, Cather may be anti-assimilationist, but *not* in a nativist manner: “Cather’s early fiction does indeed show the persistence through time of racial characteristics, and it sometimes hierarchizes those characteristics in ways that suggest some races are superior to and some more threatening than others. It also demonstrates, however, that normativity is dangerous and destructive, differences can be salubrious, and transgressions can produce beneficial change” (67).

For the remainder of this section, I will focus on one illuminating example of Cather's distinct regionalism that works against both outdatedness and nativism; namely, the way in which *The Song of the Lark* critiques twentieth-century cultural standardization from a distinctly multicultural and multilingual point of view. These discussions begin early on in the rural small town setting of Moonstone, as the narrator continuously associates American looks and countenance – particularly in girls – as something that is conventional and uninspiring. Consequently, female characters such as Thea's sister Anna and her rival Lily Fisher turn into emblems of America's cultural standardization:

“Anna, she's American,” Mrs. Kronborg used to say. The Scandinavian mould of countenance, more or less marked in each of the other children, was scarcely discernible in her, and she looked enough like other Moonstone girls to be thought pretty. Anna's nature was conventional, like her face. (131-32)

Thea's rival [Lily Fisher] was also a blonde, but her hair was much heavier than Thea's, and fell in long round curls over her shoulders. She was the angel-child of the Baptists, and looked exactly like the beautiful children on soap calendars. Her pink-and-white face, her set smile of innocence, were surely born of a color-press. (62)

Thea's older sister Anna looks American enough to be considered pretty in the Moonstone circles, yet the novel's omniscient narrator does not valorize such aesthetic judgments. To be “Moonstone” is to be “American,” but the small town as the nation's emblem is here judged, through Anna, as “conventional” both in nature and in looks.

Similarly, though Lily Fisher is beautiful and adored in Moonstone as the ultimate American girl, she is utterly common; Lily's appearance is so standardized that she resembles mass-produced images of children on soap calendars. To *be* American, as Lily, or to *become* Americanized, as Anna, are acts the novel is critical of, for they lead to a type of homogeneity and conformity that can destroy the cultural diversity of a place like Moonstone.

Just as we saw previously with immigration, the omniscient narrator uses its authority in guiding readerly opinion in these discussions of American countenance and cultural standardization, as well. In another instance of figural validation, the narrator sides with Ray Kennedy in preferring Mrs. Kronborg's looks over the conventional, all-American countenance of white Moonstone women: "Ray Kennedy always insisted that Mrs. Kronborg was 'a fine-looking lady' but this was not the common opinion in Moonstone. Ray had lived long enough among the Mexicans to dislike fussiness, to feel that there was something more attractive in ease of manner than in absentminded concern about hairpins and dabs of lace. . . . *He was right*; Mrs. Kronborg was a fine-looking woman" (114; emphasis added). Once again, the narrator signals which one of the townspeople is right in their judgment, and it just so happens to be a character who is sympathetic to the immigrant and minority groups living in Moonstone.

This topic of cultural standardization was of major concern for nearly all twentieth-century regional authors, though their politics varied greatly from one school of regionalism to another. While some, like the Southern Agrarians, uplifted regional literature and culture in order to battle against the homogenizing nature of industrial civilization, others, such as the revolt from the village writers, were "equally concerned

with deadening standardization, but instead of seeing traditional, rural culture as an antidote to urban alienation, these novelists saw it as the seedbed of conformity” (Lutz 104). One of the most famous voices in this debate was Carl Van Doren who, as Mark Whalan explains, “envisaged a landscape of ‘Americanized’ regions whose original variety had been incrementally homogenized by the economic forces of an incorporating America” (108). This concern was shared by early twentieth-century authors, critics, and scholars alike, as the worry grew that rural and small town America, while lacking an authentic culture of its own, could easily become a breeding-ground for a homogenized, middlebrow mass culture, with possible implications towards fascism (Hegeman 134-46).

Cather’s take on cultural standardization differs somewhat from the other contemporaneous accounts due to her focus on immigration. In a novel like *The Song of the Lark*, it is the process of Americanization that leads to the erasure of cultural differences. As immigrant and refugee families from different linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds become “American” like Anna, culture and arts in the U.S. become homogenized in a deadening manner. It is therefore immigration and particularly immigrant characters such as Thea – who do *not* assimilate, who do *not* become American – that function as the savior of both rural regions and American cultural life at large. Thea’s maturing voice reflects such ideas in the novel. During her childhood, Thea remains abashed about her Swedish heritage, but gradually comes to change her mind:

Dr. Archie chuckled. “Oh, a Swede can make good anywhere, at anything!

You’ve got that in your favor, miss. Come, you must be getting home.”

Thea rose. “Yes, I used to be ashamed of being a Swede, but I’m not any

more. Swedes are kind of common, but I think it's better to be *something*.”

(83)

To remain Swedish and distinctly un-American is to be *something*, in opposition to the nothingness of standard American culture. It is precisely Thea's difference that marks her as someone with potential for artistic creativity as she begins to rise in the ranks of opera singing. This coupling of immigrant heritage with artistic expression is the novel's antidote to cultural standardization, and it is an argument that Cather explored outside of her fiction, as well. A widely discussed speech of hers from a 1921 event in Nebraska explicitly ties Americanization and industrialization to a loss of culture and the arts: “The Americanization committee worker who persuades an old Bohemian housewife that it is better for her to feed her family out of tin cans instead of cooking them a steaming goose for dinner is committing a crime against art” (qtd. in Cather, *Willa Cather in Person* 147).³⁶ For Cather, forced Americanization is detrimental not only to immigrants' livelihoods, but to the arts in a larger sense as well. Here, as in her early prairie novels, Cather argues against the erasure of diverse, foreign, polyglot, pre-industrial traditions and heritages and sees the coupling of immigrant roots with peripheral American regions as central to the flourishing of American cultural life.

It is significant that the nothingness or sameness the novel critiques in characters like Anna and Lily is not seen as inherent to the countryside or even rural small towns. Cultural standardization in *The Song of the Lark* is something that affects urban America just as much as it does rural regions. Though Thea early on in the novel emphasizes that

³⁶ This speech was particularly focused on critiquing the English-only laws that were passed in Nebraska at the time. For recent scholarly discussions of the speech, see Wilson (129) and Whalan (118-19).

Moonstone and Chicago are very different from one another, both locations are populated and plagued by mediocre, artless souls. This becomes evident when Thea meets Jessie Darcey, a young American singer who gains popularity among the masses in Chicago despite having little artistic talent. In a telling moment of free indirect discourse, the narrator/Thea ruminates how “Chicago was not so very different from Moonstone, after all, and Jessie Darcey was only Lily Fisher under another name” (261). Just like Lily in Moonstone, Jessie in Chicago represents the “commonplace young woman” (261) whose fame Thea cannot fathom. It is once again the bland, all-American girl who becomes the symbol of cultural homogeneity and standardization in the novel.

Yet, Moonstone doesn’t escape criticism either. Despite the rather positive take on prairie and rural lands in Cather’s early novels, *The Song of the Lark* shares some features with the revolt from the village tradition. The novel comments on the mean-natured aspects of small town living, defining gossip as the “terror of little towns” (126), while grown-up Thea names Moonstone’s inhabitants as “comfortable, selfsatisfied people” who are hostile “towards any serious effort” (308). Thea’s sister, Anna Kronborg, turns into an example of such people, resembling the type of small town characters that novels such as Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* ridicule. Anna judges everything from Thea’s travels to her Mexican friends, thus representing small town traditionalism, small-mindedness, and conformity within the Kronborg family.

In fact, the various members of the Kronborg family come to represent different stances in the debates over cultural standardization, migration, and Americanization in small town America, with Anna and Thea serving as the opposite ends of the spectrum. What ultimately separates the Kronborgs is their attitude towards ethnic minorities in the

country, and thus migration becomes once again central to the novel's political critique. While Thea and her mother see the flat lands as a home for poor refugees and Thea embraces the Mexican community of Moonstone, her other siblings share bigoted and racist opinions with some of the white American members of the Moonstone community. Once Thea revisits Moonstone after her first year in Chicago, these differences in opinion lead into a full-blown fight at the Kronborg kitchen table. When Thea's brothers and sisters condemn Thea for "singing with the Mexicans all night," Thea attempts to fight against their white supremacist views, defending her Mexican friends. In the end, it is Mrs. Kronborg who calls out Thea's siblings for their "race prejudices," concluding that "[t]he Mexicans suit me and Thea very well" (237).

Thea and her mother value both cultural and ethnic heterogeneity and offer a counterforce to the Americanized, standardized tendencies of Moonstone, thus representing the type of rural America the omniscient narrator is more or less implicitly in favor of. Meanwhile, Anna, Gunner, Gus, Charley, and even their father become examples "of the Moonstone kind" (240) Thea thought her family had avoided; the kind that readily adopts close-minded, anti-minority, and conformist positions of Americanized thinking. In redefining her siblings as the "Moonstone kind," Thea associates small town living with the negative tropes of white homogeneity and backwardness and concludes that her siblings have become her "natural enemies" (240). As a result of these fights, the biological family is forsaken, and Thea leaves her childhood home for good.

What is significant about these family feuds is that through them, the omniscient narrator provides a platform for voices of various perspectives in the debates over

Americanization and migration to be heard, while also gently guiding the reader towards a progressive stance. Instead of presenting all of the family members' views on neutral ground, the omniscient narrator not only validates certain figural opinions, but also uses authorial, gnomic statements to implicitly undermine others. For example, when Thea's brother Gunner early on in the novel comments on "dirty Mexican" customs, the omniscient narrator dismisses such opinions as mere insults to be ignored, stating that a "Mexican learns to dive below insults or soar above them, after he crosses the border" (49). This gnomic moment, given in present tense as a shared piece of knowledge between the reader and the text, is a swift and indirect way for the narrator to use its authority over the multitude of voices present in the novel.

Such use of gnomic statements is another example of the difference between Cather's engaging and Anderson's distancing omniscience. In her analysis of the gnomic space, Maria Mäkelä discusses how the gnomic statement is conventionally

thought to signal authorial control; it expresses a universal truth or maxim and reaches beyond the diegetic world to the reality shared by the author and the reader. It is a rhetorical figure associated with authorial intrusion à la Balzac, the omniscient narrator assuming a pronouncedly dominant rhetorical position as the spokesperson for the work's ethics and its relation to knowledge. ("The Gnostic Space" 115)

Mäkelä, however, complicates these traditional accounts by showing how the gnomic space functions as a site for the negotiation of authority, knowledge, and values within a text, lending authorial ethos for characters' voices, as well (125). What is particularly interesting for my study of regional omniscience is Mäkelä's suggestion that

authorial concerns may not only manifest as imposing intrusions, but also as agential indecision in these types of gnomic spaces (113). I would argue that Cather's use of gnomic statements to propose shared values with the reader is a more subtle way for a female author in early twentieth century to take authority over a political question in their writing. Susan S. Lanser has argued that an authorial voice, such as a heterodiegetic one, can lend cultural authority for women authors because it allows "the writer to engage, from 'within' the fiction, in a culture's literary, social, and intellectual debates" (*Fictions of Authority* 17). Thus, omniscience can function as a feminist strategy for women authors to take on political and cultural authority. It is perhaps due to the gendered expectations regarding authority that Sherwood Anderson can easily opt for imposing intrusions and explicit claims for authority in his regional writing, while Cather's omniscience is more subtle and engaging in its value-laden gnomic statements.

Returning to the question of rural regions, though Anna's Americanization turns her into another one of the "Moonstone girls" and Thea's siblings become representative of the bigoted small town trope, *The Song of the Lark* resists identifying Moonstone solely with the types of Anna, thus rejecting an easy critique of small town America as a region of conformism and backwardness. The fact that Thea has to leave while Anna stays in Moonstone implies that perhaps small town America is more welcoming to Anna's type, but other versions and visions of rural and peripheral America remain alive in the novel. The further away Thea travels from her childhood parish, the more insistent she becomes of the idea that she, too, is Moonstone:

"Keeping! I like your language. It's pure Moonstone, Thea,— like your point of view. . . ." . . . "Well, I've never said I wasn't Moonstone, have

I? I am, and that's why I want Dr. Archie. I can't see anything so funny about Moonstone, you know." (359)

Thea is as much Moonstone as her siblings, and she becomes a life force that can battle against the type of conformism and standardization her siblings succumb into. These other interpretations or versions of Moonstone coexist both through Thea, who brings Moonstone with her during her travels, as well as through Thea's aunt Tillie, who remains in Moonstone as a queer, unassimilable immigrant character.³⁷ In the end, what forces Thea to abandon Moonstone is not the small town itself, but her family members who assimilate into the bigoted strands of the town, turning Moonstone and its surrounding flat lands from a migrant "refuge" into a hostile place:

This place had always been her refuge, but there was a hostility in the house now which this door could not shut out. This would be her last summer in that room. Its services were over; its time was done. She rose and put her hand on the low ceiling. Two tears ran down her cheeks, as if they came from ice that melted slowly. She was not ready to leave her

³⁷ For an analysis of Tillie as a queer, unassimilable inhabitant of Moonstone, see Lindemann. For Lindemann, "queer" refers not only to its most common definition as something counter to heteronormativity, but she also expands the term to signify other non-normative ways of being and existing. As she explains, "'queer' often functions throughout Cather's early fiction as the name of a bodily difference that is perceived as socially unassimilable, whether that difference is a matter of sex or gender 'troubles,' racial or ethnic otherness, or nonnormate physical appearance or ability" (47). For example, Tillie in *The Song of the Lark* as well as Ivar and Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!* are sexually and/or ethnically queer; in addition to decentering and questioning heterosexuality and heteronormativity, they question and complicate whiteness and the racialization of citizenship in the U.S.

This coupling of ethnicity and sexuality is reverberated in other early queer scholarship on Cather; for example, Katrina Irving suggests that Cather employs ethnically marginalized groups, such as immigrant minorities, in order to discuss homosexuality in *My Antonia* (95). For other lesbian and queer readings of Cather's life and work, see Sharon O'Brien (*Willa Cather*), Judith Butler, and Jonathan Goldberg.

little shell. She was being pulled out too soon. She would never be able to think anywhere else as well as here. (238)

Ultimately, the regions that are portrayed in the most positive light in the novel – Thea’s various “little shells” or “caves” (238, 298) – are all located in rural, small town, or otherwise peripheral locations. These little womb-like caves that range from Thea’s upstairs room in her family’s Moonstone house to the cliff dwellings in Panther Canyon are the true locations for artistic inspiration – embodied places where Thea feels she can be and think more freely. The rural in *The Song of the Lark* is not something inherently standardized, outdated, and locked in the past; it can also function as a source for artistic inspiration and future possibilities for immigrant characters such as Thea. As Mark Whalan aptly summarizes, for Cather “the cultural pluralism of the prairie contained at least two things worth preserving: a residue of preindustrial cultural practices that could serve as a point of resistance to the new (and national) economy of mass-produced communities, and alternative modes of perception and expression that were essential to artistic creation” (118). While Cather’s speech on tin cans and Bohemian traditions speaks to the preindustrial cultural practices worth preserving, *The Song of the Lark* focuses on analyzing how the intertwining of peripheral regions with immigrant backgrounds can lead characters like Thea to alternative modes of expression and artistic creation.

At the heart of the possible downfall of small towns and rural regions is, therefore, what happens to immigrants and their cultural heritage. This focus on cultural pluralism in the countryside is what marks Cather’s regional writing as distinct from others. Guy Reynolds has argued that Cather is “one of the few modern Midwestern writers

unaffected by that cult of insularity which seems to have stamped writers from Hamlin Garland and Sherwood Anderson through to Garrison Keillor” (67). Whereas for many regional authors the small town is everything, for Cather the small town is cosmopolitan, always filtered “through memory, migration, and cultural inheritance” (67).³⁸

In addition to focusing on issues of migration and multiculturalism, Cather, as I have highlighted, also differs from some of her regional contemporaries through the type of omniscient voice she employs in her early prairie writing. I began this chapter by bringing out the many mutually conflicting interpretations of Cather’s works and the issue of how Cather’s production is able to lend itself to such differing arguments and political stances. Perhaps some of the ambivalence – particularly in her early novels that exclusively use a heterodiegetic narrator – is due to omniscience, free indirect discourse, and the many value-laden utterances whose source remains unlocated.³⁹ What I have tried to show here is that omniscience, rather than being simply authoritative, can allow for ambivalence, particularly in the engaging narrative style of someone like Cather. Indeed, true polyphony comes not from a multitude of characters or voices per se, but from a multitude of worldviews present in a novel. This is at the core of Bakhtin’s conception of polyphony, as he explains in his study of Dostoevsky’s poetics:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of

³⁸ According to Reynolds, Cather’s cosmopolitanism and awareness of cultural variety made her stance also different from mainstream progressivism, which was an overtly American movement and not very hospitable to the foreign or the alien (15).

³⁹ In relation to the (im)possibility of locating the source of a text’s values, some Cather scholars have tried to rescue Cather from critiques against unfavorable political positions through an “unreliable narrator” framework, where Cather is seen as working against the political acts deployed by her protagonists (Wagers 108).

Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather *a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (6)

In opposition to such a multitude of voices and consciousnesses is the unitary “monological” novel, where characters – instead of being subjects – become the objects of authorial discourse as their points of view are subordinated to the voice of the author (Bakhtin 7-8; see also Steinby 37-54). I would argue that *The Song of the Lark* offers a rather polyphonic account of rural America in the Bakhtinian sense, particularly in contrast to Anderson’s more monological *Winesburg, Ohio*. One can easily find contradicting stances and points of view in Cather’s novels that are not outright overruled by an authoritative heterodiegetic narrator. Cather’s novels give more space for various characters to take on the role of storyteller, and that can certainly be a source of political ambiguity as well. However, a critical reader can and should analyze the implicit ways in which the omniscient narrator of a text such as *The Song of the Lark* does also guide the reader towards certain stances in the midst of the polyphony – as we saw, for example, in the Kronborg family debates regarding minority communities.

Perhaps Cather’s early prairie novels are different and distinct in their rural representations because they fall between major regional traditions and world events. Cather was influenced by and connected to local color authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett, yet she is of a later progressive and modernist generation. At the same time, she began to write the prairie trilogy in the 1910s prior to the mainstreaming of nativism and the

emergence of the revolt from the village tradition, which perhaps explains why *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* have a more positive take on the countryside than some of Cather's later texts. These two novels were also published before the First Red Scare, which carried a fierce xenophobic and nativist element to it. Already with the final prairie novel, *My Ántonia*, a shift takes place towards a less optimistic and hopeful vision of multicultural and rural America. As Reynolds explains,

Between 1916 and 1918, when [Cather was writing *My Ántonia* and] the Americanisation debate began to form, but before the issue was usurped by nativism, it was possible to imagine a multinational America in which different cultures coexisted. The war, the upsurge in patriotism, and the concomitant legislation to regulate immigration and foreign languages put an end to the idea that the America coming into being would be a multicultural Utopia. (73)

By the publication of *My Ántonia*, it had become increasingly difficult to hope for a tolerant, multicultural future for America, even in the form of fiction. This does not imply, however, that *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* are somehow depoliticized takes of an earlier, simpler time in American history. Already in the late nineteenth century, strong opposition rose towards "alien" landowners and it became increasingly difficult for immigrants to own American soil in the Midwestern states (Reynolds 57). This is the historical time and setting of *O Pioneers*, which presents the success story of a Swedish farmer family with no allusions to the legal difficulties foreign farmers faced at the time. Yet, scholars have argued that such omission of historical persecution is a form of strategic political critique, instead of an attempt to paint a rosy, nostalgic version of

America's prairie past. It is worth quoting Reynolds at length again, because he gives one of the most interesting rebuttals of Cather's alleged depoliticized and nativist writing:

The novel's refutation of nativism, of narrow or xenophobic provincialism is pertinent to the context in which Cather wrote. Cather created an American frontier which diverges from the actualities of the late nineteenth-century Midwest; but her fictionalised frontier tells us a great deal about her fascination with an open, pluralist, cosmopolitan culture of the American plains. The frontier of *O Pioneers!* is at ease with itself, and thus becomes a progressive 'good community' that rebuffs the xenophobia implicit in the actual history of the Midwest. (58)

In other words, Cather creates an alternative past in order to present a pro-immigration take during her own writing time, when nativist thought was becoming increasingly politically mainstreamed. In the final chapter of the present work, I will argue that Finland-Swedish modernist Hagar Olsson performs a very similar move by creating an alternative past/future for rural Karelia during a time of heated debates over multiculturalism and nationalism in Finland. Though Reynolds' interpretation is based on *O Pioneers!*, what I have attempted to show here is that *The Song of the Lark* is similarly invested in the political discussions of its time, using the rural small town of Moonstone – along with its national and transnational networks – as a way to comment on the present and future of migrants, minorities, and cultural expression in America.

My argument is that *The Song of the Lark* goes against the typical critiques made against regional writing – particularly its backwardness, nostalgic longing, and interest in ethnic homogeneity – and belongs to the type of critical, feminist regionalism Fetterley

and Pryse have analyzed. Cather's novel does not blame the countryside or represent the rural as a scapegoat for the negative developments of a modernizing world. Instead, her writing asks what leads people in various regions to hold certain kinds of views, and why a rural small town may provoke some of its members to take part in conformist or bigoted actions. Furthermore, her discussion of the rural is always entwined with an inquiry into how characters are affected by the countryside according to intersecting aspects of their identity – whether it is the Americanized Anna, the blond savage Thea, or the minority members of Moonstone's Mexican community. Representations of the countryside in Cather's early novels function – through the guidance of the omniscient narrator – as a political stance in favor of immigration, and thus her writing becomes an example of the type of feminist literature where peripheral regions become a location for political critiques to stem from.

There is, however, an additional argument that has been famously made against regionalism: the work it has arguably done in favor of the establishment of the American empire. It is this topic of empire that I will turn to in the final section of this chapter, with a particular focus on how the novel's omniscient narrator takes part in the acts of building or questioning an image of America as a transnational empire of immigrants. Even though *The Song of the Lark* pushes back on some of the preservationist, nostalgic, and racist associations of regionalism and is critical of cultural developments from Americanization to standardization, does this critical lens extend to the American nation-state itself? In the final section, I will consider whether the novel is for or against the global American empire that began to emerge in early twentieth century during Cather's writing time.

2.4. THE TRANSNATIONAL “SAVAGE BLOND”: RACE, REGION, AND EMPIRE

Scholars such as Amy Kaplan, Richard Brodhead, and Ryan Poll have argued that regional literature functioned as a key builder of the American nation-state and, consequently, of the American capitalist empire, starting with nineteenth-century local color literature.⁴⁰ The rural small town turned into a significant literary trope, an imagined national home that was able to unify American readers in the aftermath of the Civil War and later on as the American empire was expanding (Poll 16). Amy Kaplan has pointed out how regionalism, consumed by the increasingly urban and diverse reading public, contributed to national centrality by creating a common inheritance in imagined rural origins (“Nation, Region, and Empire” 251). Consequently, the rural “others” of regional literature became “both a nostalgic point of origin and a measure of cosmopolitan development” for urban readers (251). Regionalism provided urban Americans with literary tourism into the lives of exotic others who were both more familiar and domestic as well as less threatening than the immigrants coming into the country en masse (251-52).

⁴⁰ Though much of these discussions on region, nation and empire focus on nineteenth-century local color literature, post-World War I regional literature has been discussed along similar lines. In his analysis of the relationship between regionalism and federalism, Mark Whalan provides a helpful summary of these debates: “scholarship has frequently diverged on the issue of whether regionalist literary aesthetics were constitutive of a nationalizing cultural and political project, becoming little more than a ‘henchman of the nation state,’ in Scott Herring’s words, or acted instead as a critical counterweight to its operations” (106). According to Whalan, the “parameters of that debate are identifiable in the regionalist literature of World War One” (106).

My discussion of region and empire in *The Song of the Lark* falls into a somewhat ambivalent temporal position, as the novel belongs neither to the local color nor the post-World War I regional tradition. Since much scholarship on twentieth-century American regionalism focuses on texts from the 1920s onwards, their interpretations of nation and empire regarding Cather’s writing are based on her later works, which differ both thematically and formally from the prairie novels I focus on here. For significant scholarship on twentieth-century (post-World War I) regionalism, see, for example, Dorman and Whalan.

Poll has analyzed the small town trope's development under global capitalism, arguing that the small town in early twentieth-century literature was able to symbolically integrate and order the American nation-state while hiding the rise of America's imperial power by staging the U.S. "as an innocent, contained island community" (5). Indeed, the power of regionalism seems to be in its ability to hide and make invisible various hegemonic relations; regionalism creates a cultural past that erases prior conflicts between natives and settlers (Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire" 256), and it mentally prepares Americans for imperial expansion while camouflaging the country as an innocent community (Brodhead 133; Poll 5). Furthermore, by showcasing different local traditions from various American regions and thus "rendering social difference in terms of region," regionalism effaces "more explosive social conflicts of class, race, and gender made contiguous by urban life" (Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire" 251).⁴¹

Here, I want to study how these arguments about regionalism's relation to American imperialism and nationalism map onto Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, a novel that explicitly refers to America as an "empire" as it follows the development of Thea's character from Moonstone to Denver, Chicago, Panther Canyon, and finally to the capitals of Europe. Cather wrote her novels between 1913 and 1947, which were, in the words of Joseph Uργο, "precisely the years in which the position of the United States as a world power solidified," while Cather's own life spans American expansion from "the close of the western continental frontier" to "the opening of the global imperial frontier" ("The Cather thesis" 42). She has, indeed, often been named as an author of empire,

⁴¹ Susan Hegeman has made a similar point in her discussion of early twentieth-century regionalism: "Descriptions of regional uniqueness, dressed up with lots of local charm, served as an effective discourse for obscuring the significant racial and class tensions of the Depression era" (131).

although scholars have disagreed on the extent to which Cather either promotes or questions American imperial acts.⁴²

What hasn't been adequately analyzed in these debates is the role that narrative voice – and particularly omniscient narration in Cather's early novels – plays in the texts' discussion of the American nation-state and empire. In fact, though many scholars have noted regionalism's ability to hide a multitude of hegemonic relations, more research needs to be done not only on which relations and structures are made invisible, but on *how* regional texts are able to render such relations invisible in the first place. As Susan S. Lanser argues, the power of narratives is to present ideas in implicit, non-“vulgar” ways, while the potential of narrative theory is to elucidate the very dynamics that narratives aim to conceal (“Toward a (Queerer)” 23). Whereas the previous section emphasized how omniscience in *The Song of the Lark* lends itself to present a polyphony of different voices and worldviews, here I will turn to another feature of omniscience: its supposed ability to hide, conceal, or neutralize hegemonic discourses (Barthes).

In the following, I will argue that the omniscient narrator in *The Song of the Lark* establishes an image of America as a powerful, transnational entity particularly in two

⁴² For example, Guy Reynolds argues that Cather's novels “fictionalise the transfer of European empires to America, and the subsequent growth of an American empire” (46), and Urgo states that Cather's writing shows how quintessential transit has been for the expansion of the American empire (“The Cather thesis” 38-9; see also *Willa Cather and the Myth*). Both Urgo and Reynolds discuss how dislocated, transitory, and migrant people strengthen the American empire in Cather's writing, though from slightly different vantage points. According to Urgo, Cather's novels *supplant* pre-American loyalties (of religion, ethnicity, etcetera), by a national displacement (“The Cather thesis” 41). Reynolds, on the other hand, sees Cather's novels as arguing for pre-American heritages and racial diversities to be *maintained*, because such cultural pluralism can work in favor of national growth (47, 58).

Not all scholars see Cather as writing *for* the empire, however. While Urgo's understanding of Cather is strongly American – he sees her writing as promoting the ideals of transit, expansion, and national identity – Kelley Wagers has argued that Cather's novels instead “oppose acts of historical imperialism by which one takes possession, in various ways, of past lives, objects, ideas, and stories for personal and national gain” (107).

seemingly neutral and implicit ways: firstly, by telling and re-creating transnational networks of American family histories, and secondly, by focusing on Thea's character as an emblem of both America's created cultural past and its transnational, even imperial future. After an overview of the importance of networks in the novel's narration, the majority of this section will concentrate on the second aspect concerning Thea. I will analyze how Thea's relation to empire is shaped by discussions of race, natives, and competitive bourgeois thinking, and how the omniscient narrator complicates Thea's character by representing her both through the objectifying gazes of other characters, as well as through Thea's own lived experience.

Early on in the novel, the omniscient narrator takes a step back from presenting the events and dialogue of various characters in the Kronborg household in order to tell the migratory background of the Nordic-American family. While Mrs. Kronborg's father "had played the oboe in an orchestra in Sweden, before he came to America to better his fortunes" (25), Mr. Peter Kronborg "came of a poorer stock than his wife; from a lowly, ignorant family that had lived in a poor part of Sweden" (19). Peter's great-grandfather had first gone to Norway to work as a farm laborer, thus contributing a "strain of Norwegian blood" to the family line, before the Kronborgs crossed the ocean to the U.S.

Though the majority of the novel focuses on showing the characters' thoughts and actions (either through dialogue or internal focalization), while the omniscient narrator stays in the background of the events, there are moments, like the ones detailed above, when the narrator pauses the present action to let the reader know the broader transnational histories of different migrant characters. In addition to the Kronborgs, we learn that Thea's piano teacher in Chicago, Andor Harsanyi, "belonged to the softer

Slavic type, and was more like a Pole than a Hungarian,” and had run “away and crossed the ocean with an uncle, who smuggled him through the port as one of his own many children” (183). In another instance, the narrator lists the many nationalities Fred Ottenburg’s mother, Fraulein Furst, had been engaged to in her youth; from “an American actor” and “a Welsh socialist agitator” to “a German army officer” (281). By listing and explicating the racial and ethnic types, national origins, or reasons for entering the U.S. for various characters, the narrator creates and neutralizes an image of America as a multicultural, transnational space, whose scope extends well beyond its geographic borders.⁴³ Consequently, even Moonstone – a rural periphery – turns from a “merely” local American town to a place that is connected to the rest of the world and speaks to the transnational expansion of the U.S. through its migrant families.

In addition to rendering visible the connections between the U.S. and other countries through immigrant bodies, and thus legitimizing the idea of the United States as a transnational power, the narrator also comments on networks that strengthen the American nation-state from within. Again, a small town such as Moonstone is connected to urban America through traveling and migrating characters such as Thea, and this connection is enabled by modern forms of transportation. This becomes explicitly noted as Thea tries to explain the importance of the railroad to a town like Moonstone: “Harsanyi asked Thea how she happened to know so much about the way in which freight trains are operated, and she tried to give him some idea of how the people in little desert towns live by the railway and order their lives by the coming and going of the

⁴³ See also Nathaniel Cadle’s analysis of American immigrant authors, and particularly his argument that the “routes of physical and material movement created and maintained by migrant communities helped to lay the foundation for U.S. cultural hegemony but also provided a means for resisting and critiquing that same cultural imperialism” (28).

trains” (184). Though we never find out what explanation Thea gives Harsanyi, the final paragraph of *The Song of the Lark* presents one answer, through the words of the omniscient narrator:

The many naked little sandbars which lie between Venice and the mainland, in the seemingly stagnant water of the lagoons, are made habitable and wholesome only because, every night, a foot and a half of tide creeps in from the sea and winds its fresh brine up through all that network of shining waterways. So, into all the little settlements of quiet people, tidings of what their boys and girls are doing in the world bring real refreshment; bring to the old, memories, and to the young, dreams.

(490)

The final paragraph takes place in the “Epilogue” of the novel, where the narrator returns to Moonstone in 1909 to show how Thea’s aunt, Tillie, continues to enjoy her rural life, particularly through the news she regularly reads on Thea’s transnational success. In these concluding sentences, the narrator yet again resists condemning or criticizing rural small towns; the water in the peripheral lagoons is only “seemingly stagnant” to an outsider’s eye. At the same time, the narrator makes it clear that what keeps rural America alive is its connection to the rest of the empire. The omniscient narrator is one of the storytellers or networks between the different parts of the country that can bring “tidings” from one region to another, showing how “little desert towns” such as Moonstone are always connected to the broader networks of the expanding nation-state.

Most importantly, however, the novel's discussion of race, region, and empire takes place through Thea and her immigrant body. Joseph Urgo has stated that the novel suggests "a parallel between Thea Kronborg's individual ascent (and her movement from a small western town to the cultural centers of the East and of Europe) with the progress of the American empire" ("The Cather thesis" 41), turning Thea into a "textual representation" of empire (44). Indeed, ideas of empire seem to resonate positively with Thea. When witnessing the old wagon trails of pioneers along the vast plains and ridges of the country, Thea becomes teary-eyed at the sight, despite the fact that – in the omniscient narrator's intervening words – "They were, indeed, only old wagon ruts." But the trails become representative of something more, especially once Thea remembers hearing the story of the first telegram in the region:

Coming up from Laramie, the old man had told them that he was in Brownsville, Nebraska, when the first telegraph wires were put across the Missouri River, and that the first message that ever crossed the river was "Westward the course of Empire takes its way." He had been in the room when the instrument began to click, and all the men there had, without thinking what they were doing, taken off their hats, waiting bareheaded to hear the message translated. Thea remembered that message when she sighted down the wagon tracks toward the blue mountains. She told herself she would never, never forget it. The spirit of human courage seemed to live up there with the eagles. For long after, when she was moved by a

Fourth-of July oration, or a band, or a circus parade, she was apt to remember that windy ridge. (54-55)⁴⁴

The first explicit mention of empire in the novel is here connected to manifest destiny. The wagon trails become significant because they trace the history of settler-colonialists, yet the passage is able to skip any direct reference to the settlers themselves. What we witness, instead, are the trails, which in Thea's mind are connected to the blue mountains and, most importantly, to the "spirit of human courage." It is as if that human courage moved along the ridges and left behind wagon trails on its own, thus erasing the bloody human history that took place between settlers and natives in the process. Consequently, Thea's outlook on the American empire expanding westward is full of positive emotion, and this memory – which she promises never to forget – comes to her again during patriotic events, such as Fourth-of-July orations. The second mention of "empire" in the novel is given in a similarly happy light, as Thea ruminates how Ray Kennedy "too, had that feeling of empire; as if all the Southwest really belonged to him because he had knocked about over it so much" (220). What makes Thea feel close to Ray is their shared sense of "empire," connected to a feeling of knowledge and ownership of the American land.

The Song of the Lark came out in 1914 and is largely set at the turn of the century, which means that its references to empire are entangled with the idea of the western frontier – hence the connections to manifest destiny and the ownership of the land in

⁴⁴ Thea's memory of the telegram story is repeated as Cather's own biographical memory in a 1923 essay of hers. Cather writes how "[w]hen I was a child I heard ex-Governor Furness relate how he stood with other pioneers in the log cabin where the Morse instrument had been installed, and how, when it began to click, the men took off their hats as if they were in church. The first message flashed across the river into Nebraska was not a market report, but a line of poetry: 'Westward the course of empire takes its way.' The Old West was like that." ("Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" 236).

Thea's contemplations. Additionally, this was also a time period that witnessed the emergence of the United States as a global, colonial power. As James Smethurst explains,

Before the 1890s, United States expansionism had been basically limited to the North American continent. Between 1894 and 1903, the United States seized Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, Samoa, and the Philippines. During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of twentieth, much of the Caribbean and Central America became a virtual United States protectorate, with United States armed forces frequently intervening in local politics. (4)

Moreover, Cather's writing time saw the United States turn into a hotspot for immigrants and refugees from around the world, thus establishing an idea of the global reach of the nation, while also bringing forth a desire and need to create a cultural origin for Americans. These different versions and developments of the country's imperial power are brought into a discussion through Thea, whose body becomes racialized as a conflicted site of both native "savage"ness and European immigration.

In order to analyze these topics, I want to move focus to consider figural voices: in particular, through which voices do the discussions of empire and the racialization of Thea take place in the novel? I find it significant that both the few explicit references to empire, noted above, as well as the more implicit discussions of the expansion of America's capitalist power are typically first introduced to Thea (and the reader) through male characters. The story of the first telegram is told to Thea by an older man, while Ray Kennedy's storytelling about his travels across the country plays a significant role in creating Thea's "feeling of empire" (220). If Thea indeed becomes a representation of

empire, as Urgo suggests, it is worth noting that it is the male characters around her who push her towards such a future early on. One of the first examples of this is Thea's childhood piano teacher, Wunsch, who compares Thea to Columbus:

“You know,” she brushed his coatsleeve quickly with her yellow head. “Only how can I learn anything here [in Moonstone]? It's so far from Denver.” Wunsch's loose lower lip curled in amusement. Then, as if he suddenly remembered something, he spoke seriously. “Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires. The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing— desire. And before it, when it is big, all is little. It brought Columbus across the sea in a little boat, *und so weiter.*” (75-76)

Through dialogue, the men around Thea begin to train her towards a path of power and fame. All in life is quite quaint and small – even Columbus's colonial boat, according to Wunsch – except for the type of desire he recognizes in Thea. Like Columbus, Thea can and should travel across the world, and it is the various men around her who provide her with the material support and correct mindset to begin her ascent towards transnational greatness. By benevolently comparing an immigrant child with a “yellow head” to someone like Columbus, perhaps the best-known figure of the colonial project of the Americas, Wunsch paints the two as equally innocent examples of transatlantic migration, and once again the effects of the establishment and expansion of the United States on natives go unnoticed in the novel.

It is time to dwell more at length on the question of natives and erasure in *The Song of the Lark*, because it connects both to the racialization of Thea as well as to the

novel's larger take on the United States' development into a capitalist empire. The men in *The Song of the Lark* – most importantly Ray Kennedy, Wunsch, and Doctor Archie – not only introduce Thea to imperial thinking in Moonstone, but they also begin the process of racializing Thea's body. Though much of Thea's racialization is focused on her Swedish heritage – her white skin and yellow hair⁴⁵ – this immigrant background is often coupled with references to native-like being. In Chicago, Thea is named “the savage blond” (177) and a “fine young savage” (203), while in Moonstone Ray Kennedy notes how both Thea and her mother “carried their heads like Indian women” (121). Though Thea is initially described as native-like by the men around her, she adopts this identification and spiritual connection to indigenous people later on in the novel, once she visits the cliff dwellings of an Ancestral Puebloan tribe in the fictional “Panther Canyon” of the Southwest. During her summer in the ruins, Thea imagines an embodied connection to the bodily routines of the native women who used to inhabit the region hundreds of years earlier, and her time there is later described as the defining moment of her development into a singer. Indeed, while the novel has no native characters nor a discussion of native genocide, Thea becomes defined as a peculiar mixture of both blond Swedish ancestry and native characteristics, and she comes to find her own artistic inspiration through Ancestral Puebloan culture.

⁴⁵ In addition to the “Scandinavian face,” “milky white skin,” and “yellow” hair (10, 11) that Doctor Archie notes on the first pages of the novel, Thea is later described as becoming even more ideally Scandinavian. When singing in Chicago, Thea's song turns her hair “yellow,” and her skin “whiter” (191). These references to Thea's whiteness are typically coupled with aesthetic and sexualized objectification. Another example of this is Moonstone's young Mexican men idealizing Thea's whiteness: “The Ramas boys thought Thea dazzlingly beautiful. They had never seen a Scandinavian girl before, and her hair and fair skin bewitched them. ‘*Blanco y oro, semejante la Pascua!*’ (White and gold, like Easter!) they exclaimed to each other” (230).

Much has been said of Thea's relationship to the cliff dwellings in the Southwest, and scholars have particularly paid attention to how the region functions as a source of artistic awakening and modernist inspiration for both Cather in her own life, and for Thea in *The Song of the Lark*.⁴⁶ For the present study on regionalism's relation to hegemonic discourses, what is perhaps most significant about Panther Canyon is what it tells us about the appropriation of native cultures in the production of the American empire. Cather joined many other intellectuals in her interest in the Southwest, and this interest was largely shaped by contemporaneous native stereotypes. As Sarah Clere explains,

Both ethnographers and tourists found Native peoples of the Southwest more historically and aesthetically compelling than the tribes who occupied the Great Plains. Plains Indians' role as nomadic hunters seemed less appealing and less "civilized" to white Americans than the agrarian lifestyle practiced by the Native occupants of the Southwest. In terms of the evolutionary continuum upon which late-nineteenth-century anthropologist placed non-white peoples, southwestern Indians seemed closer to European culture (and thus more advanced) than their counterparts in the central United States . . . Americans, eager to lengthen

⁴⁶ For example, Ann Moseley et al. point out how the Southwest became critical for Cather's modernism, because her "introduction there to ancestral Pueblo locales and ruins was the source of a profound artistic awakening for her, the selfsame awakening she gives Thea in *The Song of the Lark*" (xvii). This coupling of artistic awakening with native ruins shows how Cather, like many other modernists, was interested in primitivism. For a discussion of Cather's modernist association of the primitive with originality and art, and how it parallels the association of Thea with the primitive and the savage, see Ann Moseley (244-5). For a comprehensive, critical discussion of Thea's relation to the Southwest and appropriation of native cultural heritage, see Sarah Clere. For an earlier take on the Southwest, see Ellen Moers, who argues that Cather creates a feminized topography in Panther Canyon to explore female self-assertion and creativity (see also Reynolds 59). For a discussion of how the cliff dwellings in *The Song of the Lark* relate to the Chicago business world and Chicago's larger civic project of the "higher life," see Michelle Moore.

their own national history and produce historic monuments and ancient artifacts that could vie with Europe's, showcased these [southwestern cliff-dweller] ruins as national treasures. (21-23)⁴⁷

Not only were white Americans intellectually and aesthetically interested in the southwestern natives, they also identified cliff-dweller ruins as a sort of national heritage to the modern white American. This was further enabled by the ruins' lack of living native inhabitants, since the Ancestral Puebloan cultures had vanished much before European arrival (Clere 24; see also Woidat). In contrast, the living indigenous peoples of the Great Plains were both systematically removed and exterminated by white America, while popular culture typically reduced them to representations of aggressive enemies (Clere 22).

Cather's early twentieth-century regional novels take part in these conceptualizations of native culture by erasing some native histories while valorizing others. I have earlier noted the benevolent tone the narrator and various characters take towards immigrants and pioneers in *The Song of the Lark*, to the extent that they are seen as the first builders of the American prairie land. A similar move takes place in Cather's *O Pioneers!*, when the omniscient narrator erases natives completely as it imagines white settlers as the first humans to experience the land with emotional connection: "For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning" (65). Both *O Pioneers!*, and *The Song of*

⁴⁷ Clere, furthermore, explains how scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner helped create a new paradigm at the turn of the century, where the binary between savage and civilized was dismantled to imagine, instead, some natives as the evolutionary ancestor for white Americans (30). While the Ancestral Puebloan ruins thus became a site of connection for Americans, the cliff-dwellers' extinction also created anxieties about the continuance of Americans' own civilization (23).

the Lark imagine the prairie as having been empty prior to the Nordic immigrants' arrival, and thus take part in the erasure of the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains. In the words of Guy Reynolds, "Cather figures the pioneer effort as the inauguration of civilization" in America (52).

Meanwhile, Thea feels connection to the southwestern cliff-dwellers, who can be discussed at length in the novel while sidestepping "the issues of European conquest, land partition, and removal, topics that were particularly acute in the temporal context of *The Song of the Lark's* action," since the Ancestral Puebloans had no historical connection to European colonization (Clere 30). Thus, the novel reflects the role the southwestern United States came to play during Cather's time period, as the region allowed white Americans like Cather to escape modernity and to imagine themselves as culturally connected with the ancient civilizations (Clere 24). Thea, too, adopts this mindset and begins to envision herself as the successor of cliff-dwellers' traditions. At the end of her stay in Panther Canyon, Thea decides to shred the last memories of Moonstone for good: "she had clung fast to whatever was left of Moonstone in her mind. No more of that! The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations" (308). In this ambivalent moment of Thea's and the narrator's voices merging together, Thea triumphantly abandons Moonstone, her biological family, and her past in favor of the cliff-dweller's "older and higher obligations" that she appropriates for herself.

What I find significant about Thea's moment of revelation in Panther Canyon is that the future she envisions for herself in the footsteps of the cliff-dwellers is a capitalist, upward climb to transnational fame that comes to resemble the expansion of the American empire. By abandoning Moonstone, Thea not only abandons her biological and

geographic roots, but also more abstract understandings of community and empathy in favor of competitive individualism (see also Clere 37). The cliff-dwellers supposedly provide Thea with a deeper “past” than her biological family line, but in an eerie manner, this southwestern native history is employed to the furtherment of a white individual’s success story, much like it was employed to create a cultural past for the expanding American empire during Cather’s time. Panther Canyon thus becomes the culmination of Thea’s developmental process towards individualist, bourgeois thinking that becomes naturalized in the novel as the endpoint of Thea’s *bildung*.

Though Panther Canyon marks a turning point in Thea’s career, her maturation into a life of upward climb starts earlier in the novel, as she transitions from rural to urban America. While growing up in Moonstone, Thea has a collective interest towards the world, but her regard and empathy for others is dismissed by some of the men around her. In one instance, pages of narration are devoted to describing Thea’s anxiety and worry over a vagrant “tramp” who appears in Moonstone, is disregarded and banished by the community, and ultimately faces a tragic death. While Thea agonizes over how the entire community of Moonstone needs to take blame for the tramp’s fate, Dr. Archie steers Thea’s thoughts elsewhere:

“Forget the tramp, Thea. This is a great big world, and I want you to get about and see it all. You’re going to Chicago some day, and do something with that fine voice of yours. You’re going to be a number one musician and make us proud of you . . . We all like people who do things” (139)

Dr. Archie ushers Thea to forget about the tramp, whose death he refers to as one of those “failures” that are “swept back into the pile and forgotten” (139). Like Wunsch,

who earlier compared Thea to Columbus, Dr. Archie, too, pushes Thea to pursue a life of transnational conquest through her singing. “We all like people who do things” is a bourgeois life lesson in abbreviated form; instead of being a waste to society like the homeless man, Thea should become a productive part of society and attempt to rise in her class status. Once again, it is the few men around Thea who interpellate her into a particular worldview while also helping her gain economic and cultural capital along the way.

Only after Thea’s urbanization in Chicago, however, does she fully adopt this mindset for herself. A moment of revelation takes place in a significant sequence, where memories and dreams of the rural are contrasted with harsh, urban realities. At first, the rural is brought back to Thea’s mind through encounters with the arts in the Chicago Art Institute and in her first concert:

[In the Chicago Art Institute:] But in that same room there was a picture—oh, that was the thing she ran upstairs so fast to see! That was her picture. She imagined that nobody cared for it but herself, and that it waited for her. That was a picture indeed. She liked even the name of it, “The Song of the Lark.” The flat country, the early morning light, the wet fields, the look in the girl’s heavy face—well, they were all hers, anyhow, whatever was there. She told herself that that picture was “right.” Just what she meant by this, it would take a clever person to explain. But to her the word covered the almost boundless satisfaction she felt when she looked at the picture.

(197)

[At the concert hall:] . . . and when the English horns gave out the theme of the Largo, she knew that what she wanted was exactly that. Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. There was home in it, too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old . . . (199)

It is once again the rural or peripheral that brings artistic inspiration to Thea. Whether physically in places like the Moonstone prairie, or in her imagination as she listens to the orchestra, artistic expression is typically tied to a rural landscape in the novel. After her first year of feeling alienated in Chicago, the museum and concert visits bring, for the first time, sensations of home to Thea; “there was home in it too” in the music she hears, while Jules Breton’s painting with its countryside setting feels just “right.” Significantly, both examples are dominated by free indirect discourse and become reminiscent of the quotation I analyzed at the start of this chapter, where Thea/the narrator envisions the prairie as a home for poor refugees, considering how “[i]t was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang— and one’s heart sang there, too” (219-20).

In all three instances, the countryside becomes highly aestheticized in an utterance whose source we cannot pinpoint. It is the “flat land” in the “early morning” that is poetically described in each of the three quotations, and thus the rural landscape becomes a highly aesthetic motif in the novel. On the surface, the prairie and the larks become associated with Thea’s thoughts, her personal growth, and search for artistic expression.

At the same time, however, the polyphonic narration ties this aesthetic landscape to the politics of empire; the quotations are framed by references to such details as the story of “the first telegram message” (199), the “new world” (199), and “poor refugees” (219). The aesthetic and imperial flat lands are presented to us as an eloquent truth that moves beyond Thea’s individual experience to larger authorial and narratorial concerns.

This aestheticization and idealization of the rural is, however, presented only to be destroyed a few moments later. Thea’s sense of belonging in the rural while listening to the music is harshly contrasted with the urban landscape she encounters outside the concert hall, where “For almost the first time Thea was conscious of the city itself, of the congestion of life all about her, of the brutality and power of those streams that flowed in the streets, threatening to drive one under” (200). Reliving the rural through an aesthetic experience and then witnessing the urban lifestyle she has become a part of, Thea abandons her past for good and adopts an individualist, survivalist thinking where others around her become her “threatening” enemies, ready to “drive one under.” In this sudden moment, Thea’s entire relationship to Chicago changes, as “All these things and people were no longer remote and negligible; they had to be met, they were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her” (201). Not only are the streets taken over by “streams” of strangers who are *against* her, in opposition to the community she knew in Moonstone, but the city is also populated by unknown men who approach Thea and ask her for sexual favors (200-1). The omniscient narrator describes this as the end of Thea’s girlhood: while standing on the street, “[u]nder the old cape she pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer” (201). Thus, the narrator suggests that it is the dual process of sexual harassment and integration into urbanized America

that forces Thea to mature into womanhood, where others pose threats to her self-determination and future success.

Though it is the cityscape that initially pushes Thea towards a new life of individual upward climb, her contempt for others soon extends from urban regions to her previous rural home. After visiting Moonstone the following summer, Thea promises to “make these people sorry enough!” and to never return: “She was going away to fight, and she was going away forever” (245). Instead of seeing a possibility for family or community in others, Thea sees obstacles to whom she has to prove her superiority by becoming a transnational star.⁴⁸ Once Moonstone and the prairie have become aestheticized experiences, something Thea can reawaken from memory for artistic inspiration, she can abandon the physical Moonstone and focus on conquering the global world of opera.

This could be the end of the novel’s discussion of Thea as someone who grows into the role of an emblem of the ever-expanding America, progressing upward from the rural to the urban and, finally, to the transnational. But I want to conclude this chapter by returning to the role of the omniscient narrator once again and by highlighting how the narrator’s ability to zoom into Thea’s interiority complicates any straightforward reading of capitalist empire in *The Song of the Lark*. While the men around Thea succeed in getting her to leave and travel to the metropolises of the modern world, the omniscient narrator reveals how Moonstone continues to haunt Thea and travel with her in her thoughts and dreams:

⁴⁸ Clere argues that Thea brings values of competitive individualism with her even to Panther Canyon, as she evaluates the long-gone native women along the lines of capitalist ethos and transforms a once-existing complex community for her own, individual means and desires (31).

Why was she going so far, when what she wanted was some familiar place to hide in?— the rock house, her little room in Moonstone, her own bed. Oh, how good it would be to lie down in that little bed, to cut the nerve that kept one struggling, that pulled one on and on, to sink into peace there, with all the family safe and happy downstairs. After all, she was a Moonstone girl, one of the preacher’s children. Everything else was in Fred’s imagination. Why was she called upon to take such chances? Any safe, humdrum work that did not compromise her would be better. (380-1) Probably she would teach music in little country towns all her life. *Failure* was not so tragic as she would have supposed; she was tired enough not to care. She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember. She had loved the sun, and the brilliant solitudes of sand and sun, long before these other things had come along to fasten themselves upon her and *torment her*. That night, when she clambered into her big German feather bed, she felt completely released from the *enslaving desire to get on in the world*. (296; emphasis added)

While the people around Thea not only racialize and objectify her body, but also witness her bodily change as she grows into an opera singer, the omniscient narrator of the novel presents Thea’s success story as more ambivalent through internal focalization that reveals her own embodied experience. Although the idea of staying in a town like Moonstone would be deemed a “failure” (296) on the outset, the possibility of hiding in one of her rural peripheries gives Thea embodied sensations of peace and happiness. Free indirect discourse blurs the line between Thea and the narrator in both quotations to show

the conflicted pull between a desire to stay in the countryside and the need to pursue a transnational success story. This latter option, which Thea chooses and the plot naturalizes as the ultimate choice, is only fleetingly revealed as draining on Thea's embodied being. What these short moments suggest is that the true "enslaving" and "tormenting" aspect of the modern condition is not entrapment in a rural small town, but the seemingly mandatory path of an individualist upward climb that requires one "to get on in the world" (296). By contrasting Thea's internal thoughts to the other (male) characters' attitudes and stances, the omniscient narrator momentarily reveals the cracks behind Thea's success story.

The identity of the American empire and the concept of American culture were under debate during the temporal context of *The Song of the Lark*. The closure of the western frontier, the genocide of natives, the influx of immigrants, and the expansion of American power overseas contributed to an interest in trying to conceptualize a presentable cultural history and future for the United States. Cather's novel provides an ambivalent solution to these issues by erasing the bloody birth of the nation-state and imagining, instead, an ancient cultural ancestry to the country through both Southwestern natives and transnational immigrants. Thea, as the contradictory, pre-historic yet modern "savage blond," who can move between rural and urban, as well as between American and foreign regions, becomes a conglomerate of these ideas and a conflicted emblem of the expanding empire. She is a "savage" successor of a fictionalized cultural past of the settlers, based on the cliff dwelling natives; she is a blond immigrant and living proof for the argument that cultural and ethnic diversity can buttress America's greatness; and,

finally, her continuously moving, transnational body anticipates the global turn the United States is about to take on the political map of the world.

However, if Thea is the textual representation of an expanding transnational American empire, then the narration implies that the process of becoming such an emblem is painful. It requires one to choose individualism over community, to lose empathy for those worse off, and to begin to see others around one's self as possible enemies. It is the men around Thea who both racialize and objectify her as a "savage blond" and welcome her into a competitive mode of thinking while encouraging her to leave Moonstone behind. Scholars have suggested that the longing for small, rural communities witnessed in local color and regional literature is the product of capitalism, which creates a desire for nostalgic longing and escape from its (painful) present (e.g. Kaplan 256). In a sense, Moonstone becomes such a site for Thea later on in the novel, as she – perhaps falsely – believes she could have escaped much of the pain of her upward climb if she could have simply stayed in her rural home.

In the contradictions between different versions of Thea's body – the success of her objectified body and the pain of her embodied presence – lies the novel's ambivalence towards immigration in rural America. On the one hand, both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* present the female immigrant as the future hope of the land; it is Alexandra and Thea who bring life to the small towns and the countryside. On the other hand, what it means to be the (feminist) future and hope of the land is given a limited definition in the novels. In both texts, it is the capitalist, individualist success story that the omniscient narration presents as the viable solution to the rural-transnational female immigrant. Marilee Lindemann has critiqued *O Pioneers!* for endorsing the heterosexual,

pioneering business-woman Alexandra while silencing the sexually and ethnically “queerer” characters of the novel. In contrast, Lindemann sees *The Song of the Lark* as a more transgressive text since it celebrates precisely the queerest immigrant characters – Thea and Tillie (44-49, 77-78). My analysis of *The Song of the Lark*’s discussion of race, region, and empire complicates and pushes back on this comparison, showing that perhaps Thea is not that different from Alexandra, after all. While Alexandra becomes the land-owning capitalist, Thea’s success is just as much based on the same competitive economic system, as she gains her riches by singing opera to the elites of the world.

As we have seen, the omniscient voice is central to the novel’s conceptualization of America and its rural-urban, as well as native-foreign, and national-transnational networks, both in articulating the migratory roots of its immigrant citizens and in focusing on the development of Thea. Much of my analysis on the novel’s discussion of region and empire in this final section has focused on Thea, thus revealing the novel’s emphasis on an individual character, rather than on a community. Indeed, despite having a multitude of characters and a small-town milieu for a large section of the novel, *The Song of the Lark* is surprisingly little about community, especially once Thea adopts a more individualistic mindset. Perhaps here lies a final reason why omniscience is suitable for the novel’s politics: omniscience lends itself well to stories that focus on isolated subjectivities and bourgeois egoism.⁴⁹ Still, as I have tried to highlight, *The Song of the Lark*’s omniscience is not as monological as some of the other regional texts of the time. Even when focusing on Thea’s individual upward climb, the narrator gives Thea

⁴⁹ In contrast to experimentally polyphonic and communal voices, a singular omniscient and authorial voice in narrative fiction is often ideologically more connected to individualism and what Brian Richardson has described as “bourgeois egoism and the poverty of an isolated subjectivity” (56).

moments to express her resistance towards the path she ultimately adopts for herself, thus complicating the novel's stance on the transnational expansion of her success.

Unlike regionalism that is nostalgic or constructed by the nation-state to serve its own interest – as theorized by scholars such as Kaplan and Brodhead – Fetterley and Pryse locate women regionalists who produce counter-hegemonic works that offer “alternative understandings of what U.S. culture both has been and might still become” (31). To a large extent I would argue that Cather offers such alternative understandings of American culture, particularly in her context of Americanization and nativism debates, while she also resists writing regionalism that would efface social difference or nostalgically long for ethnic homogeneity. Social differences are deeply marked in *The Song of the Lark*, not only in terms of region, but also in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Yet, when it comes to the American nation-state and its imperial expansion, the politics of *The Song of the Lark* seem less counterhegemonic. In his analysis of Cather's wartime essays and novel *One of Ours* (1922), Mark Whalan suggests that Cather was more interested in considering “what a practice of multiple loyalty would look like rather than to craft any kind of radical politics of resistance” (119). I would argue that something similar takes place in *The Song of the Lark*; rather than resisting national narratives or radically questioning the state of the nation/empire itself, the novel is more interested in showing the U.S. as a deeply multicultural and -lingual space. In both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, immigrants and refugees are a vital, necessary resource not only for rural America, but for American culture in general. It is the empathic and engaging omniscient narrator who both presents the concept of the

American empire as a naturalized truth, while also functions as a gentle guide for the reader to realize this multicultural and regional potential for American greatness.

CHAPTER III
TRANSNATIONALISM, REGIONALISM, AND RACE:
THE MODERNIST BLACK RENAISSANCE

3.1. FRAMING NELLA LARSEN: RACE, REGION, AND MODERNISM IN THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

In the often repeated words of W. E. B. Du Bois, the problem of the twentieth century was “the problem of the color line” (*The Souls of Black Folk* xxxi, 10, 29). This was a social and material crisis that manifested itself in the everyday lives of African Americans in the U.S. from disfranchisement, beatings, lynchings, and race riots to the evolving practices of Jim Crow segregation. But the color line was also a cultural problem that reverberated in the arts of the first decades of the century, paving way toward the New Negro Movement and the modernisms of the Black Renaissance authors. As Mark Sanders has noted, the chaotic conditions leading to modernism for African Americans stemmed to a large extent “not from epistemological concerns, but from the harrowing dissonance between constitutional guarantees and systematic political oppression” (137).

The African American political and cultural movement of the early twentieth century goes by many names: the New Negro Movement, the New Negro Renaissance, the Black Renaissance, and the Harlem Renaissance.⁵⁰ While the New Negro Movement

⁵⁰ There has been much scholarly debating around these names and their meanings. According to Mark Sanders, the New Negro Movement spanned the creation of institutions like the Urban League, UNIA, the founding of independent newspapers and schools, the riots of the red hot summer of 1919, and the pursuit of legal cases, while the New Negro Renaissance refers more specifically to the modernist artistic movement happening within that context (138). George Hutchinson talks of the modernist movement as “Harlem Renaissance” (though acknowledges it

typically refers to the larger political changes of the time that “fought to make palpable Reconstruction civil rights legislation” (Sanders 137), the various different “Renaissances” allude to the modernisms that black authors and artists were creating in the first decades of the century. In other words, the Renaissance is often seen as a cultural moment within the larger and longer New Negro Movement, though these definitions continue to be debated. Nella Larsen belonged to the group of black authors living in Harlem during the height of the Renaissance in the 1920s and has become canonized as an important modernist Renaissance author in later literary scholarship. Therefore, before looking at Larsen and her works more closely, I want to begin by detailing the context and central questions of the New Negro Movement at large.

Central to the entire concept of the New Negro was a heightened sense of political self-awareness and its coupling to not just economic and political issues, but also to the arts.⁵¹ In the words of Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, the New Negro project

is a problematic name) and sees it as a part of a “‘long’ New Negro movement, or simply Negro movement, that began in the post-Reconstruction period and culminated in, say, ‘The Letter from Birmingham Jail’” (“Questionnaire Responses” 445). Barbara Foley rejects “Harlem Renaissance” as a problematic name because it defines the movement predominantly as a cultural one. She prefers the alternative “New Negro Movement” because it “not only more accurately reflects the movement’s contemporaneous self-concept (it became known as a ‘renaissance’ primarily in retrospect) but also leaves open the connection between economics and politics, on the one hand, and art and literature, on the other” (439). Ernest Julius Mitchell II has made a compelling case for the use of “Black” Renaissance instead of “Harlem” (641-2).

Black renaissance and the New Negro Movement are my preferred terms in this chapter, although the modernist movement has become canonized and is typically referred to as “Harlem renaissance,” as I will explain in the following section.

⁵¹ For a comprehensive account of the history of the term “New Negro,” see Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.” References to the “New Negro” began in the 1890s; “it dated to N. B. Wood’s book *A New Negro for the New Century*, and was prefigured in Booker T. Washington’s 1895 Atlanta Exposition speech” (Fabre and Feith 13; see also Sanders 137). It became a rallying designation of the time, referring to new political self-awareness and dedication to the cause of black empowerment, and it was used, for example, in Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World*, by the NAACP, in the New Negro (both

rested on a philosophy, but also on a collective effort to develop artistic expression among people of African descent, with the aim of ending decades of invisibility, challenging assumptions and prejudices, and stimulating the imagination. If the goals were to achieve social justice and racial equality, the arts were seen as a propitious field for advancement as well as for self-realization. (13)

Among many New Negro thinkers and authors, there was a strong sense that arts and aesthetics could affect the social and political position of African Americans (see also Bernard 435). While participants of the movement disagreed and debated every possible aspect of what the Renaissance should look, read, and sound like, most artists shared a common project of controlling the image of black people “in an assertion of pride in the face of political oppression and stereotyping” (Fabre and Feith 26). According to George Hutchinson, the Renaissance goal of using the arts to advance freedom and equality derived “not from a desire to prove that blacks could reason and write, as has often been charged, but from a belief in the central role of aesthetic experience in the achievement of new forms of solidarity and understanding, and thus in the transformation and national integration of cultures” (*The Harlem Renaissance* 90).

To understand these goals and where they stem from, it is important to contextualize the movement and its politics. The social, cultural, political, and economic contours of the Renaissance include the Great Migration from the rural South, black participation in World War I, the black nationalisms of Marcus Garvey, white intellectuals’ fascination with the primitive and the exotic, the economic expansion of the

Alain Locke’s edited anthology and the movement at large), and in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro* (1934) (Fabre and Feith 4-5; Sanders 137).

U.S., as well as the racist science and racial stereotypes across U.S. media at the time (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 3). Moreover, as Hutchinson has shown, both the Black Renaissance and American modernism at large were deeply affected by Boasian anthropology, cultural pluralism, and the philosophic tradition of pragmatism (*The Harlem Renaissance* 26, 33-93; Sanders 130-32).⁵² American institutions from universities and academic fields to publishing venues were drastically and broadly changing during the early twentieth century, thus also restructuring “the contexts in which black and white authors and audiences interacted,” and consequently shaping the forms of American modernism (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 4).

Renaissance authors and thinkers were deeply divided about matters of representation – when it comes to New Negro literature, who deserves to be represented and how? Major points of discussion were, for example, the use and appreciation of African culture and arts (e.g. Alain Locke’s stance in favor of “neo-Africanization”; see Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 92) versus the downplaying of African influence

⁵² The impact of Franz Boas’s anthropological work on the formation of American modernism cannot be underestimated. As Hutchinson summarizes, “In the context of massive immigration and reactionary Anglo-Saxonism, virulent antiblack racism, and beliefs that Native Americans were doomed to extinction because of their lack of biological ‘fitness,’ Boas mounted a relentless assault upon racist intellectual paradigms and social policies, often paying dearly for his efforts” (*The Harlem Renaissance* 64). Hutchinson goes on to argue that the influence of Boasian anthropology is one of the central differences between American modernism on the one hand and the high modernism of Europe and its expatriates on the other. Whereas the latter knew little about the major anthropological developments headed by Franz Boas at Columbia University, Renaissance authors in the U.S. were deeply affected by Boas’s work.

Alain Locke, one of the key theorists of the New Negro Movement, is a case in point in this regard. Locke was inspired by both Boasian anthropology and cultural pluralism when he developed his theory that “African American culture would not only build upon its unique values, but as the most ‘mixed’ of American cultures was best endowed to advance American aesthetics and thus to play the dominant role in the Americanization of culture in the United States” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 92). Similar discussions of American cultural pluralism were taking place across the American literary field; as we saw in the previous chapter, Cather was also invested in such issues when she represented migrants and immigrants as playing a major role in the development of American culture.

on black authors and imitation of white literary traditions. Another central issue was class: in the words of Sanders, “competing models of Victorian gentility and working-class iconoclasm would define much of the New Negro Renaissance debate over black representation and its effectiveness for New Negro Strategy” (Sanders 139-40; see also Caughie). While figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Jessie Fauset (as well as *The Crisis* magazine they edited) advocated for rather respectable, bourgeois, and upper/middle-class representations of black people, particularly the younger generations disagreed with what they perceived as classist thinking and parroting of white values.⁵³ Langston Hughes’ essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) has become a canonical text in the debate. Hughes was dedicated to representations of working-class African Americans and argued in the essay that the mountain standing in the way of true Negro art in America is the “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (55). A similar critique is made in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, when the protagonist explicitly criticizes the tendency of some black people in America to parrot white culture:

To each his own milieu. Enhance what was already in one’s possession. In America Negroes sometimes talked loudly of this, but in their hearts they repudiated it. In their lives too. They didn’t want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white

⁵³ Though I associate Du Bois here with the middle- and upper-class strand of the movement, he was also politically radical and feminist in his time. In fact, scholars such as Shane Vogel have analyzed how Du Bois was more than the bourgeois “bad guy” he has often been represented as in Renaissance scholarship (136).

overlords. They were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine. Too bad! (68)

In addition to debates about which classes should be represented and how, the New Negro Movement was defined by class struggle on a larger scale, too. Scholars such as Barbara Foley have pointed out how Alain Locke's edited collection *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) "played a key role in defining the New Negro as culture hero rather than anti-capitalist militant" (439). Furthermore, Foley explains how Locke's intervention should be seen "as a form of class struggle in the realm of ideology, one that sought to diminish the impact of political radicalism and to promote a class collaborationist and quietistic culturalism" (439). In other words, thinkers such as Locke were able to frame the movement as a predominantly aesthetic one, and thus downplay its ability to advocate for large-scale institutional and societal changes beyond furthering the progress of the Negro elite (see also McKay, *A Long Way from Home*).

Another major point of debate was the movement's black-and-white relations. The Renaissance was strongly interracial, with both black and white audiences consuming black arts during the heyday of the "Harlem vogue":

In Langston Hughes's words, "the Negro was in vogue" largely due to the wide popularity of the music and the performing arts more generally. As a result, much of this attention (and financial support) began to turn to writers, largely through the work of Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, W. E. B. Du Bois and Charles S. Johnson, and black publishing venues such as *The Crisis* (the journal of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]), *Opportunity* (the magazine of the

Urban League), and *The Messenger* (a black socialist magazine). (Sanders 141)

Many of the movement's black authors and journals depended on white patronage, while they were also interested in educating white audiences on African American culture and accomplishments. Central journals such as *Opportunity* thus had a double-audience of both white and black readers, and brought together emerging black artists with white funders through writing competitions and gatherings (see Carroll). Such relations have brought up another target of critique in the movement; namely, the idea of black authors pandering to white audiences. When figures like Du Bois critiqued lower-class representations of black people, they often based their argument on the assumption that such authors were harmfully exoticizing and stereotyping black people in order to reach white readers. According to this line of thought, depictions of working-class blacks, Harlem nightlife, and the like were seen as reinforcing harmful racial stereotypes in an attempt to allure white audiences – in other words, they represented a type of minstrel show instead of a realistic depiction of black life. Some white authors, such as Carl Van Vechten, were also accused of furthering such stereotypes, in addition to being blamed for “negrophilia” and the ventriloquizing of black voices through their literature.⁵⁴ It is worth highlighting the complexity of these debates, however. As Hutchinson has detailed, “while many of the participants in the Harlem Renaissance complained about white

⁵⁴ See Michael North's foundational work on how discourses of blackness and the borrowing from black culture were central to white avant-garde and modernist art. More recently, James Smethurst has analyzed the impersonation of black voices by white modernist artists and explored the notion that “white North American writers (and their middle-class black counterparts) need to get in touch with the vital currents of African American popular and folk cultures, must ‘black up’ a bit, in order to create truly viable American modernism” (205). See also Fabre and Feith, who count one of my case studies, Sherwood Anderson, as an example of white American playwrights culpable of “negrophilia” (11).

exploitation of the movement, they often did not agree on *which* whites were exploiters. Conversely, virtually all of them thought of certain white authors as models for Negro writing, but they disagreed on who these models should be” (*The Harlem Renaissance* 20).⁵⁵

Accusations against interracial relations in the Renaissance have reverberated in later literary theory, as early scholars of the movement deemed the Renaissance a failure that was taken over by whites (see Huggins; D. Lewis; cf. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem*). A major trendsetter in changing this mindset has been George Hutchinson’s 1995 monograph *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, where Hutchinson adamantly argues against failure narratives and sees the movement’s success as stemming precisely from its interracialism: “the most important African American literary modernists were those who were *both* most prone to interracial intimacy (despite its frequent cost) and most secure in their convictions about the cultural wealth of black America” (25). For Hutchinson, the Renaissance was a movement of racial co-operation, and its interracial aspects were integral to its modernism.

Placing authors such as Cather and Larsen under a comparative study makes sense considering the interracial context of early twentieth-century modernisms, especially since the minority groups their works discussed – European immigrants and African Americans – were in many ways connected to one another. The Black Renaissance developed in conjunction with debates about the Americanization of immigrants, and

⁵⁵ Of particular interest to the present study is the fact that revolt from the village authors like Sherwood Anderson are often mentioned in Renaissance studies as influential white authors of the time. Nella Larsen read Anderson’s work, too, and when she and Walter White considered starting a publishing house in Harlem, the initial plan was to first publish African American literature and later add authors such as Sherwood Anderson and Willa Cather to the catalogue (Hutchinson, *In Search of* 207, 209, 217).

some have argued that the “immigrations from Europe and the Caribbean were practically as important to the form of the ‘Negro renaissance’ as was the migration of rural blacks from the South” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 9). The connections between the two groups were multiple: the concept of cultural pluralism central to the Renaissance developed together with debates about the Americanization of immigrants, many black uplift organizations were formed similarly to the organizations created to help newly arrived immigrants, and European immigrants also composed new audiences for the arts and established publishing houses and magazines that published Renaissance texts by black authors (9-10).

This leads me to a final aspect I want to highlight about the Renaissance, one that is particularly topical to the project at hand; the centrality of regional movement to the formation of the Renaissance and its modernist aesthetics. Though the conceptualization of the Renaissance as a significant part of American modernism has been acknowledged since the late 1980s, scholars such as James Smethurst have more recently argued that the Renaissance authors and their predecessors were in some ways the *first* modernists of the U.S., significantly contributing to the development of now-canonical white modernist works as well (218).⁵⁶ Smethurst bases his argument on the formative role that the South-

⁵⁶ Central works that established the Renaissance as a modernist movement include Houston A. Baker Jr.’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), George Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995), and Werner Sollors’s *Ethnic Modernism* (2008). See also Sanders, who defines the New Negro Renaissance as a part of America’s “heterodox modernism” (129). Though more and more scholars define the Renaissance as not only modernist but influential to American modernism at large, Michael Bibby’s excellent account on the racial formation of modernist studies shows how black authors have been excluded from the literary canon of modernism throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first.

There are, to be sure, scholars who have argued against defining Renaissance authors as modernist. Michael Nowlin’s recent work makes a compelling argument for understanding authors such as James Weldon Johnson as pursuing a “normal” African American literature that would have universal and mass appeal, instead of being invested in modernist experimentation.

North migration and racialization of urban space had in the U.S. Due to the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North, the racial segregation of urban space due to Jim Crow, and the development of the black ghetto across American cities (95), African American authors would be among the first writers to describe the journeys along the North-South axis as well as “the sort of fragmented subjectivity and urban alienation” that later became a hallmark of modernism in the United States (15). The spatial racialization of urban space gave both modernism and modernity a different form in the U.S., though Smethurst argues that eventually the results of this “new geography of race would have an enormous impact on the sense of modernity and modernism internationally,” too (13).

Movement and migration between various regions was central to the formation of the entire New Negro Movement; according to Fabre and Feith, the New Negro confidence in race pride and artistic creativity came from “better opportunities created by the Great War and the Great Migration that set African-Americans flowing through the United States and between continents” (2). Already in 1925, Alain Locke stressed how this geographic movement was also a change towards modernity and democracy for African Americans: “With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance – in the Negro’s case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern” (Locke, “The New Negro” 6). Though many of these accounts stress the importance of the urban and juxtapose it to the possible backwardness

Nowlin notes how much of Renaissance scholarship relies on the unexamined assumption that “the term ‘modernism’ confers greater aesthetic, critical, and interpretive value to the art works it classifies (an assumption that undoubtedly owes to the fact that ‘modernist’ literature became the canonical literature of academic study)” (516).

of the rural South, movements within and from rural regions were central to the Renaissance and its modernist aesthetics, as well.

Indeed, when it comes to theorizations of the countryside in Renaissance modernism, the influence of the rural South has been noted previously, though typically scholars focus on a few figures such as Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer. Hurston was known for using and studying black folk culture and dialect of the rural South both in her literary and anthropological work, while Jean Toomer's modernist classic *Cane* (1923) was inspired by his time working as a teacher in the South. Toomer himself described rural Georgia as the region that pushed him towards writing: "I saw it as my passport to this [literary] world" (Letter to Waldo Frank, qtd. in Lutz 168). Moreover, the literal migration from the rural South to Northern cities transformed into a cultural migration as well, once older rural folk arts from country blues to spirituals were radically adapted in their new environments (Sanders 139). Thus, the countryside was not some separate "other" to Renaissance modernism, but deeply connected to its development.

Because of these historical and geographical changes that deeply impacted the lives of millions of African Americans, "regionalism" takes on a different tone in the writings of black authors of the time. Toni Morrison has argued that African American authors value the countryside for different reasons than their white counterparts; for many black authors, the rural is not a location for nostalgically longing for the past, but instead it is significant for hosting the presence of an ancestor who can guide the protagonist of the text ("City Limits" 39).⁵⁷ Thus, anti-urbanism in black texts that we might call

⁵⁷ Though Morrison focuses mostly on black writing from the 1970s and 1980s, she traces this tradition to the modernism of the early twentieth century and points out Toomer's *Cane* as a

“regional” stems from different fears than the issues I outlined in the previous chapter. For writers like Cather and Anderson, worries over urbanization concern topics such as post-industrial decay, the development of consumer culture, and the rise of the (white) middle-class (see “City Limits” 37). Furthermore, regionalism in black modernism was paralleled and affected by the anthropological work of Franz Boas, resulting in authors such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston attempting “a far more ‘realistic,’ quasi-ethnographic approach to folk experience and expression than had their regionalist literary precursors” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 68).

My point is not to suggest that black and white regional modernists had separate literary traditions or should not be analyzed comparatively – quite the opposite. Despite obvious differences, black and white regional authors were working within and responding to the same political, cultural, and economic changes that took place in the U.S. during the first decades of the century. Even during the Renaissance, these authors were reading one another’s texts while they were also evaluated comparatively with one another. As an example, William Stanley Braithwaite, whom W. E. B. Du Bois appointed as the chief authority on poetry for *The Crisis* magazine, viewed Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset as his favorite novelists of the Renaissance period, and he went on to compare Fauset as one of the best American novelists in the tradition of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Willa Cather, Julia Peterkin, and Zona Gale (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 152). Such comparisons between

predecessor (“City Limits” 42). James Smethurst makes a similar point to Morrison, arguing that in the migration novels of black modernists, the urban setting is seen as a destroyer of black culture and racial values, while “the old home of the South, with its connection to nature and the line of cultural transmission seen reaching more directly to Africa, is either practically or spiritually untenable” for black city-dwellers (121).

Fauset and Cather have been made in recent regional scholarship as well (Lutz 170). I hope to contribute to such comparative takes on regional women authors by analyzing how both Cather and Larsen employed the countryside for the purposes of political commentary, albeit with different narrative forms and thematic outcomes.

The context of the Renaissance that I have here outlined was, to a large extent, also the context of Nella Larsen's writing, and the New Negro Movement has heavily framed early scholarly takes on Larsen's oeuvre. Though many of these topics and debates of the Renaissance at large – representations of race and class, the role of movement and the rural South, and questions of modernist aesthetics – will be analyzed in the following sections with a focus on Larsen's debut novel *Quicksand* (1928), I will also pay particular attention to how Larsen differs from many of her contemporaries in the Renaissance movement.

Nella Larsen enjoyed a relatively brief writing career and fame in the 1920s and early 1930s before falling to near-complete oblivion for decades. With the resurgence of scholarly interest in the Black Renaissance, starting in the 1980s, Larsen was re-found and re-claimed as a significant contributor to the modernist movement. It is thanks to African American and feminist scholars such as Cheryl A. Wall, Hazel Carby, Thadious M. Davis, Deborah E. McDowell, and Claudia Tate that Larsen became canonized – along with other long-forgotten figures like Zora Neale Hurston – first and foremost as an African American woman modernist. Early readings of Larsen's two novels – *Quicksand* and *Passing* (1929) – typically interpret Larsen as probing the sexuality, subjectivity, and

psychology of black American women, or representing the failure of the black female artist.⁵⁸

In the following decades, Larsen has become one of the most read and taught Renaissance authors in the American educational system, leading some recent critics to even deem her as perhaps over-studied or at least overshadowing other authors, such as Jessie Fauset (e.g. Caughie 520; Sherrard-Johnson, “Questionnaire Responses” 456). And yet, a handful of scholars in the past decade have shown that the case of Larsen is far from over; from George Hutchinson’s 2006 Nella Larsen biography that proved many of the previous interpretations of Larsen’s life misleading or false, to new scholarly takes on inter- and biracialism in Larsen’s writing (Hutchinson; Walker), all the way to reconsiderations of Larsen through unexplored regional lenses, for example as an Atlantic modernist (Doyle; Scheper) or as a Scandinavian-American author (Hutchinson; Lunde and Stenport).

Many of these new takes criticize the tendency of previous scholarship to enlist Larsen as a black woman writing predominantly about black women.⁵⁹ To understand

⁵⁸ For example, McDowell states that “We might say that Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms” (xvi). Similarly, according to Hazel Carby, Helga Crane in *Quicksand* is “the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction” (174), while Pamela Barnett explains how both Helga and the narrator in *Quicksand* “recognize the exoticization and objectification of black women’s sexuality” (578). For interpretations of *Quicksand* that focus on the African American woman artist’s struggle to create art, see Davis (274) and Dittmar (146).

⁵⁹ For critiques of Larsen as primarily invested in questions of black womanhood, see Hutchinson, Walker, Doyle, as well as Lunde and Stenport. For a discussion of *Quicksand* as an intertextual “book about books” that draws from an “unmistakably biracial” literary genealogy (instead of being exclusively a part of an African American literary tradition), see Brickhouse. Additionally, Hutchinson, Walker, Sherrard-Johnson, Scheper, and others have heavily questioned previous interpretations of Larsen as continuing the “tragic mulatta” literary tradition. The “tragic mulatta” is a melodramatic form “in which the mixed-race character is seen as a split subject, tragically flawed by ‘nature’ and trapped in a narrative trajectory inevitably leading to

these criticisms, it is important to know that Nella Larsen inhabited a peculiar position along the color line; as the daughter of a white Danish immigrant mother and an Afro-Caribbean father from the Danish West Indies, she was a biracial woman with immigrant parents. Thus, her existence as the daughter of an interracial relationship threatened the black-and-white racial categories of Jim Crow America, and she explored the experience of such racially liminal characters in her writing.⁶⁰ In both of the two novels that Larsen wrote, the protagonists are biracial or at least racially ambiguous women. As Rafael Walker has argued,

Larsen takes pains to show that something about her major women characters significantly sets them apart from the less ambiguously black women around them, whether it be that they can pass for white or that they have a white parent. If Larsen had intended to explore the experiences, psychology, or sexuality of black women specifically, it seems odd that

rejection or death” (Scheper 680). According to these later scholars, such essentializing conceptions of biology and race are far from *Quicksand’s* political critiques, which instead focus on the institutions that construct and uphold harmful conceptions of race. For a discussion of the early “tragic mulatta” readings and an analysis of how Larsen wrote against the Black Renaissance’s tendency to fetishize the mulatta female body, see Sherrard-Johnson (“A Plea for Color”).

⁶⁰ For historical context on the difficulty of being an interracial subject during the Jim Crow era, see Hutchinson’s articles and biography on Larsen. Hutchinson explains how, as Larsen’s fiction stresses, “by the early twentieth century it had become distinctly disadvantageous to be perceived as the immediate ‘colored’ offspring of a white person, although being a light-skinned Negro continued to have relative advantages” (“Nella Larsen” 340-41). Prejudices existed not just within white, but within black circles as well: “black response to interracial unions and the people born of them was just as Larsen presented it . . . In the minds of middle-class Negroes, light mulattoes between 1890 and 1920 became ‘associated with sin and degradation’” (341).

An important context for this topic in the United States was the “one drop rule,” according to which “the presence of ‘white’ blood does not fundamentally change the ‘black’ subject’s identity as a ‘Negro’—even if the ancestry of that subject is overwhelmingly European . . . Conversely, the merest trace of ‘black’ blood, if known or somehow legible in body, speech, or manner, renders the subject a ‘Negro’ with all the attendant legal, social, cultural, and psychic consequences in the Jim Crow United States” (Smethurst 191).

she should have chosen to do so, in both novels she wrote, through such ambiguously raced women. (165)

Much of the early scholarship neglects the ways in which Larsen's prose problematizes American-centered notions of race through its focus on biracial characters, who not only pass race and class lines in the U.S., but also traverse across the Atlantic to Europe, with its own racial frameworks indebted to a history of colonialism. *Quicksand* is a case in point; the novel follows the travels of a biracial protagonist, Helga Crane, as she searches for her own identity and geographic belonging in the American Midwest, New York, and the rural South, as well as in her mother's native Denmark. Throughout the novel, Helga remains trapped in both racial and geographic liminality, while commenting on the various color lines and institutions that oppress her. In the remainder of this chapter, I will analyze the intersections of race, class, and gender in Larsen's *Quicksand* by focusing on Helga's biraciality through a regional and transnational lens, while paying attention to passages, geographies, and narrative forms of the novel that have received little scholarly attention.

In the following section (3.2.), I will argue that many of the gaps or misleading interpretations of Larsen and her work stem from the way she has been regionalized. I will analyze both Larsen and the Black Renaissance as examples of scholarly localization and regionalization – where significant aspects of the author's texts and the larger African American movement have been overlooked or ignored because they have been regionalized not only within a strictly national context but within a fixed urban focus as well. The section participates in the spatial and transnational expansion of Renaissance studies in order to ask what happens when we expand our regional lens to the overlooked

peripheries – in the case of Larsen, to the rural American countryside on the one hand, and to the Nordic passages in Denmark on the other. Thus, here I anticipate some of the topics of the following and final chapter, where I will fully focus on examining the so-called spatial expansion of modernist studies in order to suggest that a focus on the rural and peripheral as a comparative lens can allow us to analyze modernisms beyond the framework of the nation-state.

Section 3.3. begins the regional examinations of *Quicksand* with a focus on its Nordic aspects. I will continue the recent work of George Hutchinson, Arne Lunde, Anna Westerståhl Stenport, and Laura Doyle, who have asked what happens if we situate Larsen not only as an African American modernist, but as a transatlantic and particularly *Nordic*-American modernist as well. By focusing on Larsen’s narrative strategies, such as the use of free indirect discourse, I will analyze how Larsen’s *Quicksand* represents a comparative study of the crisis of race in modernity by following its protagonist’s travels from the U.S. to Denmark and portraying the racial abyss she falls into along the way.

Finally, section 3.4. turns to look at the countryside representations of *Quicksand*. The novel has often been described as an urban text, detailing “urban crowds” (Scheper 628) and the “female subjectivity in the urban space” (Carby 170), while Larsen has been contrasted to other Renaissance women like Zora Neale Hurston for “drawing on the materials of urban life rather than on a rural landscape or an oral tradition” (Hostetler 45).⁶¹ These are somewhat surprising interpretations, given that the novel both begins and

⁶¹ Interestingly, Hazel Carby argued in 1987 that Larsen’s long-standing position as a marginal author of the Black Renaissance stemmed from the fact that she did *not* fit into a rural and folk tradition: “In the search for a tradition of black women writers of fiction, a pattern has been established from Alice Walker back through Zora Neale Hurston which represents the rural folk as bearers of Afro-American history and preservers of Afro-American culture. This construction of a tradition of black women writing has effectively marginalized the fictional urban

ends in the rural South and thus Helga's travels throughout the text are enveloped with the countryside. In the final section I will question both the urban framing of the novel as well as the conception that *Quicksand's* modernism is based on its urban features. The point is to analyze how the rural chapters are centrally connected to the novel's political critiques, while also focusing on aspects of the novel's ending that have previously received little analysis in Larsen scholarship. In line with the feminist narratological approach of my work, I will pay particular attention to how the rural environment pushes forth changes in narrative form, as well as how a Nordic intertextual presence continues to haunt the text even when Helga settles into her most secluded American location: an all-black rural small town.

3.2. THE REGIONALIZATION OF "HARLEM" RENAISSANCE AND NELLA LARSEN

Despite its name, the movement that is now commonly termed Harlem Renaissance was international in its scope and extended well beyond the lines of Harlem or even New York City. In fact, the name itself is somewhat of a misnomer, both in the sense that it localizes the movement into the singular space of Harlem, as well as in the sense that it is a retrospective definition.⁶² For most of the movement's participants and contemporaries, the explosion of black arts starting in the 1910s and blooming in the 1920s became

confrontation of race, class, and sexuality that was to follow *Quicksand*' (175). Carby's suggestion that urban literary representations of the Renaissance have been marginalized at the expense of the rural is the opposite of my take on rural representations in this project. Perhaps Larsen's rise to fame and canonicity in the past decades shows how an urban focus has become solidified in Renaissance (and modernist) scholarship after Carby's research in the late 1980s.

⁶² The "Harlem Renaissance" was first mentioned in published form in Langston Hughes' 1940 biography *The Big Sea* (334), and only slowly spread to common use in the following decades – even though Hughes himself more often talked about "Negro" or "Black" Renaissance (Mitchell II 648-49).

understood as a Negro Renaissance, a Black Renaissance, or as the New Negro movement, following Alain Locke's seminal 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.

Locke himself used the term Negro Renaissance because he wanted to highlight the movement as international, interracial, and intergenerational in its scope (Mitchell II 641-42). It is significant that he preferred this term, even though he guest edited the famous March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* with the title "Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro," and hoped to turn Harlem into a cultural capital for black artists and people to come together. But calling the movement after Harlem makes little sense when one looks at the locations of the so-called Harlem authors and thinkers: Alain Locke lived for the most part in Washington D.C., Claude McKay wrote his major prose works outside of Harlem and even outside the U.S. (except for the posthumously found and published manuscript of *Amiable with Big Teeth*), and Jean Toomer wrote *Cane* in Washington D.C. after his time teaching in the rural South, to name just a few examples.

My point is not to downplay the significance of Harlem. As George Hutchinson notes, even though much of the movement's literature was not produced in or about Harlem, the Black Renaissance was deeply impacted by the particular conditions that existed only in Harlem and the rest of Manhattan (*The Harlem Renaissance* 5). New York was the publishing center of the U.S., while it also hosted artists from around the world, along with pragmatist philosophers, Boasian anthropologists, and social theorists (6). Moreover, New York provided "a freer atmosphere for the black artist both because of the concentration, dynamism, and diversity of racial consciousness in Harlem and because of the greater freedom and variety of interracial and interethnic relationships,

which only intensified the experimental development of new forms of ‘racial’ expression” (6). James Smethurst makes a similar point, arguing that Harlem was the capital of the movement based on a literal migration of black artists from various cultural provinces in the U.S. to New York, as well as on a symbolic migration “in which artists identified with Harlem without actually living there” (210).

And yet, what all these arguments highlight is Harlem’s importance as a connecting point to various other regions; New York was “filled with people adrift from their old moorings” (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 6), and on their way to new locations. Helga Crane sums up Harlem’s position quite aptly in *Quicksand* when she states that “It’s only another way of saying that everybody, almost, sometime sooner or later comes to Harlem, even you” (93). Though a lot of people end up in Harlem at some point, many of them, like Helga, come from another location and continue their travels somewhere else. It is these connecting regions, often seen as peripheral in contrast to the centrality of Harlem, that I am interested in.

In his thorough historical survey of the name “Harlem Renaissance,” Ernest Julius Mitchell II convincingly argues that the shift from “Negro” Renaissance to “Harlem” Renaissance was more than a change in terms; the latter concept became canonized only from the 1960s onwards and better allowed the movement to be framed as a failure.⁶³ By locating the movement in Harlem and restricting it to the temporal timeframe of the 1920s, later scholars were able to argue that the Renaissance, instead of being an on-

⁶³ Houston Baker has studied how the “failure” narrative of the Renaissance has roots in the 1960s, when “fiercely black nationalist and Black Arts advocates castigated the Harlem Renaissance as a bourgeois, individualistic, narcissistic movement working under the commands of white patronage and black bourgeois audience demands” (“Questionnaire Responses” 433; see also *Modernism and the Harlem*).

going, global project, was a momentary phase within the black elite circles of New York. Moreover, this movement had necessarily failed, with explanations ranging from the economic restrictions placed by the Depression Era, to black artists' search for white patronage and yield to primitivism, all the way to the movement's "naïve" idea that art could lead to political change for black people in America (e.g. Huggins 306; D. Lewis 305).

In the early scholarly history of the Renaissance we thus find another interesting example of how the act of regionalizing authors has been an effective way of attempting to make them minor – as we saw in the case of Cather in the previous chapter. By localizing the movement in Harlem, earlier critics could interpret the movement as a merely local enterprise with no long-lasting impacts. Though later scholars have both rebutted the failure narratives and proven the vast geographical scope of the movement, the historically less accurate concept of the Harlem Renaissance has remained in place to a large extent (see also Wall, *Women of the Harlem* 9-10). I wonder if this has to do with the fact that regionalizing a literary movement or an author along urban lines is more favorable than doing the same along rural lines. Perhaps part of the reason why Harlem has remained in place is because the Renaissance became later canonized as a modernist movement, and a focus on Harlem and New York City fits well with the urban and metropolitan bias of much of modernist studies. Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, which Mitchell II calls "the first sustained rebuttal of the litany of failure narratives" (658) was, after all, also the first sustained criticism that theorized Harlem Renaissance as a *modernist* movement.

Modernist studies of the past two decades have questioned the typical geographies of the field in an attempt to take a more transnational view at the development of various modernisms worldwide. This trend is visible in the changes that have taken place in the theorization of the Black Renaissance, as well, as the focus has started to shift from Harlem towards other metropolises of the U.S. and beyond. According to William J. Maxwell, studies of the Renaissance are able to partake in the transnational turn of the field of modernism with a particularly keen focus on “the destructive cosmopolitanism of imperial racisms and the productive failures of intrdiasporic translation” (446-47). The pathbreaking work of Brent Hayes Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003) has led the way in reimagining the locations and languages of the renaissance along such lines. While much of the scholarship on African American culture in the 1920s has emphasized the national context of the U.S., from cultural nationalism to civil rights protests and the racial uplift culture of the Renaissance, Edwards urges scholars to conceive of the New Negro Movement as a new black internationalism instead (2-3).

Indeed, the Black Renaissance thinkers were international both in their travels and their political commitments. Almost all of the major authors traveled and lived abroad: the list includes figures such as Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and, of course, Nella Larsen. Moreover, many of them saw the struggle for black rights in the U.S. in connection to Pan-Africanism and the colonial and imperial struggles black people faced worldwide in the early twentieth century. Locke envisioned the Negro Renaissance as a transnational phenomenon affecting black artists from the U.S., the Caribbean, and Africa (Mitchell II

660), while *The New Negro: An Interpretation* concludes with W. E. B. Du Bois's essay "Worlds of Color," whose colonial critique and global lens suggest, in the words of Houston Baker, a "forerunner" to current transnational scholarship (Baker, "Questionnaire Responses" 434).

As a consequence of the transnational turn, a global look at the New Negro movement seems to now be in demand. In the 2013 "Harlem Renaissance" special issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, many scholars noted that more attention needs to be paid to the international and transnational aspects of the Renaissance, and particularly to issues of migration, diaspora, and multilingualism (e.g. Baker, "Questionnaire Responses" 434; McKible and Churchill 428-29; Soto 461; Wintz 463). In the midst of this vogue, it is important to analyze what it means in practice to claim a movement like the Black Renaissance transnational. What are the concrete locations and regions newly placed under scrutiny?

If we are to look for answers in the special issue itself, the focus remains largely on urban locations even as the geographical lens is broadened beyond Harlem. For example, Cary D. Wintz explains how the Renaissance also impacted

Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, Dallas, Kansas City, and virtually *every other city* that contained a significant concentration of African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance was a national movement and one whose impact spanned the globe—certainly it was influential in London, Paris, Berlin *and the other capitals* of Europe but also throughout the Caribbean, into Africa, and even Asia. (462; emphasis added)

Similarly, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson states how “the ‘satellite salons’ in Washington D.C., Chicago, and Paris have always been on the radar, but it is now possible to trace points of contact with Moscow, Berlin, London, Mexico City, Havana, and Johannesburg” (“Questionnaire Responses” 456). Finally, McKible and Churchill name Washington D.C. and Chicago as other important sites beyond New York (428). Prior to the special issue, Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora* was largely focused on Paris and the francophone diaspora, and his later work has shown how Harlem was “one in a string of international *capitals* and played a role similar to that of Paris, London, or Marseilles in the articulation of a transnational consciousness” (Fabre and Feith 3; emphasis added).

In addition to the urban hotspots of the U.S. and Europe, there is also an increasing amount of work done on the Caribbean connections of the Renaissance (e.g. Charras; Pedersen; Putnam). Lara Putnam has interestingly argued that scholars need to *provincialize* Harlem; to conceptualize it not as a center in relation to peripheries such as the British Caribbean, but as one location in a transnational black movement that had many awakened centers and journals stemming from multiple global locations (477, 481). She furthermore emphasizes the “quotidian cosmopolitanism” of the Caribbean – how the everyday search for work led black families in the British Caribbean to travel transnationally within the region and gain cosmopolitan knowledge prior to moving to American locations such as Harlem (471).

With this chapter, I aim to analyze the movement’s connections to regions that have thus far received less focus, and therefore I hope to contribute to the influential work of previous scholars who have broadened both the geographical and linguistic

understanding of the Renaissance. In line with my project at large, I am especially interested in two regional connections to Harlem and the Renaissance: firstly, the non-Anglophone (particularly in the form of the Nordic presence in Nella Larsen's works), and, secondly, the rural. By linking the rural and the transnational together in my analysis, I want to go against the assumption that the two are mutually exclusive lenses. As a consequence of the globalization of Harlem Renaissance studies, Houston Baker concludes that labeling authors such as Langston Hughes as "local color" Negro poets is no longer a sufficient option, since Hughes was also, among other things, "cosmopolitan" and interested in various global issues ("Questionnaire Responses" 434).⁶⁴ Transnationalism too often takes place at the expense of the "regional," which, as we have seen, easily slips into an equation with the "rural" and the "minor." What follows is therefore not a rejection of the local, regional, or rural in favor of the transnational but rather, following Putnam, a provincialization of the much-studied capitals and metropolises in order to give more space for locations easily deemed peripheral and regional. It is the quotidian cosmopolitanism visible in Larsen's life and her works that allows us to consider the Nordic periphery as well as the rural, small town America as equal locations to Harlem in the modernist Renaissance movement.

Nella Larsen is a particularly interesting case study for a geographical look of the movement, since she inhabited so many different regions during her lifetime; an author

⁶⁴ Renaissance thinkers such as Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson imagined Harlem as a regional or local color literary space. Following Fetterley and Pryse's redefinition of regionalism, where the equation between "region" and "countryside" is deconstructed, literary urban spaces such as representations of Harlem could indeed be studied as examples of regional writing (for a discussion of urban regionalism, see also Squire). Instead of doing such regional analysis of Larsen's representations of Harlem in *Quicksand*, however, I would rather shift focus wholeheartedly to the more peripheral regions of her work; namely, the countryside and the Nordic countries.

who was born in the Midwest, raised in Chicago and Denmark, and later lived in the South and various areas within and around New York City. Moreover, her geographical roots were, on her mother's side, in rural Denmark and, on her father's side, in the Danish-owned West Indies in the Caribbean. But how has Larsen been regionalized in studies of the New Negro movement? To a large extent, the scholarly understanding of Larsen parallels the geographical development of Black Renaissance studies at large, as focus has slowly shifted from the national context of America into broader considerations of Larsen's transnational connections.

When interest for Larsen's works began to surge in the 1980s and 1990s, Larsen became canonized first and foremost as an African American woman author (e.g. Davis, Wall). The early feminist and U.S. nationalist focus on Larsen meant that she was analyzed as a black American writer, while interracial and transnational aspects of both her life and her texts were downplayed to a large extent. Later scholars, starting most notably with George Hutchinson, have questioned this early understanding of Larsen. Hutchinson has paid particular focus to representations of interracial identity in Larsen's *Quicksand*, critiquing earlier feminist scholars for trying to assimilate Helga Crane to "models of black female sexuality and psychology" ("Subject to Disappearance" 178). More recently, Laura Doyle has questioned the scholarly tendency to "enlist" Larsen to forward the project of African American freedom and to reproduce her race identity within the confines of African Americanness ("Liberty, Race, and Larsen" 52). In a sense, the issue is that Larsen has at times been canonized in criticism as the type of "'race' woman" Helga Crane and the narrator of *Quicksand* constantly question and ridicule (16). While *Quicksand's* characters such as Anne Grey take pride in being

African American women invested in the discourse of “uplift” for the black race, Helga and the narrator reveal how many of such “race” women in fact parrot white upper class culture, despise lower class blacks and interracial relations, while also commit themselves blindly to American patriotism and nationalism.

In their quest to canonize Nella Larsen as a black American author, many of the early Larsen scholars doubted or denied her relations to Denmark (Lunde and Stenport 229). Particularly influential were the two early biographies, written by Charles L. Larson and Thadious M. Davis, which argued that Larsen falsified many of the details of her early life. Both Larson and Davis provide questionable psychological explanations to claim that Larsen’s time in Denmark was a fantasy, stemming from a “delusion about her whiteness” (Davis 16) to attempts to gain prestige in social circles, to distinguish herself from other black Americans, and to hide traumas of her childhood (e.g. Davis 140; Larson 184-92; cf. Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen” 330).⁶⁵ In his thoroughly-researched and scathing critiques of the two biographies, George Hutchinson has rebutted such claims, proven Larsen’s biographical connections to Denmark, and rightfully called out the premises of previous Larsen scholarship:

The effect of discounting Larsen’s Danish experience and Danish background and her connection to her mother is to subordinate her mature story of her life to a story that cannot accommodate the possibility of

⁶⁵ In many of these psychologizing interpretations, Larsen is claimed to have created glamorous stories of her childhood in Denmark with her white mother because, in the alleged reality, Larsen was rejected as a child by her mother due to her blackness (Larson 184-92) – a claim that Hutchinson has overturned. Even Nella Larsen’s first two publications – English translations of Danish children’s games she learned in Denmark as a child – were interpreted by Davis as attempts to raise her status by claiming connections to a “white, foreign country” (140-41; cf. Hutchinson, “Nella Larsen” 338). For a full revision of Nella Larsen’s life and a rebuttal of the previous biographies, see Hutchinson’s 2006 publication *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*.

someone being both African American and Danish American . . . Leaving aside Larsen's extended visits to Denmark, what does it mean to say that a woman raised by a Danish mother and stepfather in an immigrant neighborhood is an "assimilationist" because she prefers interracial social occasions and informs people of her Danish background? What is being demanded here is apparently that she forget or suppress a central aspect of her identity and her personal history. ("Nella Larsen" 339)

The early accounts of Larsen reveal something about the need to fit authors of the New Negro movement into the national context of the U.S., thus downplaying for example Larsen's trans-Atlantic connections to Denmark, while they also reveal the black-and-white binary that many scholars of the Renaissance have held onto in their criticism. As Hutchinson has convincingly shown, both the Larsen biographies and much of early Harlem Renaissance scholarship have attempted to either scapegoat or repress the movement's interracial qualities ("Subject to Disappearance" 177; see also *The Harlem Renaissance*), thus reproducing "the bipolar structure of American black/white racial culture at the expense of the interracial subject" ("Nella Larsen" 345). Similarly, Werner Sollors has argued that interracial texts are often themed rather "for a black-white *contrast* of 'either/or' than for an interracial realm of 'neither, nor, both, and in-between'" (*Neither Black nor* 10). Such a tendency to fold interracial or mixed identity into a unified black identity is visible in Larsen's reception, too, and in the way in which her interracial and passing characters such as Helga in *Quicksand* and Claire in *Passing* have been analyzed (see also Walker).

In order to adequately study race and racial relations in a work such as Larsen's *Quicksand*, we need to reframe Larsen through a geographical lens that moves beyond Harlem and the U.S. and takes into account the trans-Atlantic and Nordic aspects of her writing. If early scholars have neglected the "interracial subject" of Larsen's work, as Hutchinson argues, a similar neglect has taken place in terms of the transnational subject of a novel like *Quicksand*. Helga, the interracial subject of *Quicksand*, is also a transnational traveler, whose existence critiques both the color line and the idea that a person's identity fits into the framework of a singular nation-state. In the words of Jeffrey Gray, *Quicksand* shows how "the two questions of racial indeterminacy and of geographical 'place' are not only equally paramount but finally become a single question" (259).

The Scandinavian part of Larsen's life and writing has to a large extent been "regionalized," in the sense that it has been pushed to the periphery of early Larsen scholarship. To suggest an international or transnational look at Larsen has, however, become easier due to the boundary-breaking work of a few scholars who, in the past ten years or so, have paid more attention to Larsen's connections to the Nordic region and its literary traditions. Here, again, Hutchinson has been a trailblazer, proving Larsen's broad knowledge of the writers of the Scandinavian "Modern Breakthrough" – the generation of thinkers and authors who preceded and influenced not only Nordic but European modernisms at large. Larsen was acquainted with the writings of, for example, Georg Brandes, J. P. Jacobsen, and Henrik Ibsen (Hutchinson, *In Search of* 73, 200, 207, 225-26; Lunde and Stenport 238). Not only did these authors affect Larsen's own fiction, but

she furthermore promoted them in the literary circles of Harlem, thus contributing a Nordic intertextual presence into American modernisms that requires further research.⁶⁶

In line with the transnational trend of modernist studies, Larsen has become geographically reconceptualized in the twenty-first century, most notably as a “Scandinavian modernist” (Hutchinson, “Subject to Disappearance” 185), as an author of the “Scandinavian-American” literary canon (Lunde and Stenport 230), and as an “Atlantic modernist” (Doyle, “Transnational History”; Scheper 682). For Hutchinson, Larsen’s work is reminiscent of Scandinavian modern authors who foreground “the snobbishness of the Scandinavian bourgeoisie, their obsession with class status, and the role of the exchange of women through marriage in cementing class ties” (*In Search of* 235; see also Brickhouse 549). Arne Lunde and Anna Westerståhl Stenport, on the other hand, compare Larsen to both Nordic and American-born authors such as Willa Cather, Ole Rølvaag, and Vilhelm Moberg, who wrote of the transatlantic immigrant experience. Whereas many of these “Scandinavian-American” authors focus on rural immigrants in the United States, Larsen reverses the direction of influence to examine the more urban experience of someone like Helga, who moves from the United States to Europe (Lunde and Stenport 241).

⁶⁶ Lunde and Stenport have summarized some of these connections: “Larsen had recommended a translation of Jacobsen’s realist novel about rural poverty, *Fru Marie Grubbe* (1876), to Zora Neale Hurston, who, as Jon Woodson argues, was strongly influenced by this work when composing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). And as Davis notes, when in 1926 Larsen wrote a long letter to the editor of *Opportunity* defending Walter White’s critically maligned novel *Flight*, she singled out Jacobsen as a crucial influence on the kind of modernist literature and aesthetic directions that she, White, and other 1920s Harlem writers championed (202-03), including a naturalistic focus on the contemporary social moment and the rejection of both religion and philosophical idealism” (238). For an in-depth analysis of the intertextual connections between Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jacobsen’s *Fru Marie Grubbe*, see Woodson.

Laura Doyle takes a different framework than Hutchinson, Lunde, and Stenport by paying less attention to Scandinavia and placing Larsen, instead, into a continuation of transatlantic Anglophone authors. With the concept of “Atlantic modernism,” Doyle hopes to continue Paul Gilroy’s pathbreaking work in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), where Gilroy suggests taking “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis” in order to “use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). For Doyle, Atlantic modernism is an example of a “geomodernist” unit, which includes

a range of protagonists who share Helga’s story of a racialized, traumatic, seaside launching toward freedom: Woolf’s Rachel, Rhys’s Marya, Stein’s Lena, Chopin’s Edna, Forster’s Adele, James’s Isabelle Archer, and Hurston’s Janie. All of these characters embark from a racialized place; they all suffer sexual and communal “ruin” on their water-crossing quests for freedom; they all end up radically alone or dead, and in any case prodigal race citizens. (“Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 53)

While appreciating the geomodernist framework Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel have put forth, as well as Doyle’s transatlantic analysis of Larsen, I want to end this section by discussing what I consider a possible pitfall of these recent takes on transnational or transatlantic literary analysis. Troublingly often the transnational expansion of literary research continues to be confined to an Anglo-American, English, or British colonial lens. When discussing her Atlantic case studies, such as Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Doyle’s main focus is on the concepts of “freedom” and “race,” whose linguistic history she traces into the seventeenth century and their usage during the

English Civil War (1642–1651) (“Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 53-63; “Transnational History” 535-540). During this time, a vocabulary about freedom and race developed in a specifically Anglo-Saxon context that Doyle extends to her modernist case studies in the following centuries. While the historical analysis of the development of the concepts in the seventeenth century English context is fascinating, it raises the question of why choose this particular site and time as the framework for analyzing race and freedom in Larsen’s *Quicksand*. Throughout her analysis, Doyle repeats terms such as “Anglo-Atlantic,” “Anglo-European,” “Anglo-Saxon,” and “racial Saxonism” in various forms, presenting them as a general context for understanding any English-language transatlantic text.⁶⁷ But is it not a little peculiar to bind a reading of Nella Larsen and Helga Crane with the history of seventeenth-century England (a country Larsen never visited) and with the discourse of Anglo-Saxonism, when both Larsen’s and Helga’s roots and travel in Europe happen in the context of Denmark? In other words, what does it mean to frame *Quicksand* as a transatlantic text, if that conceptualization takes place in a distinctly Anglo-European or Anglo-Saxon paradigm that does not account for the particularities and peculiarities of the true locations of Larsen’s and Helga’s travels?

Let us take a concrete example from Doyle’s analysis of *Quicksand* to illuminate the consequences of such an approach for literary analysis. Here, Doyle partly quotes and interprets a passage where Helga walks around Copenhagen and sees some of the poorer neighborhoods of the Danish capital:

⁶⁷ Some examples of this vocabulary in Doyle’s work on Larsen: “Anglo-Atlantic” (“Transnational History” 543-44, 547; *Freedom’s Empire* 397), “Anglo-European” (“Transnational History” 533; *Freedom’s Empire* 396) “Anglo-Saxon” (“Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 52; “Transnational History” 535-36) and “racial Saxonism” (“Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 65; *Freedom’s Empire* 397).

The State apparently feels “bound to give assistance” to the impoverished – yet only, [Helga] *wryly* adds, as help “on the road to the regaining of independence” from the others (75). Helga precisely pinpoints the tension between group and individual in the orthodoxy of *Anglo-European modernity*: everyone *must* be an independent individual in order to be a member of the group; and conversely, one can only be a group member by assenting to the laws of *laissez-faire economy and individual self-support*. This orthodoxy is the essence of a *racial Saxonism* parading as social contract, and it creates the incoherence of Helga's desires for race and for escape from race. (“Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 65; emphasis added; see the same analysis in *Freedom's Empire* 396-97)

In Doyle's reading, Helga is “wryly” critiquing the Danish state for only “apparently” giving assistance to its poor members, when in fact the state is forcing individuals to self-support in a “laissez-faire economy” (note that I am here quoting Doyle's own words in her analysis, not Larsen's in the novel). According to Doyle's reading, Helga is ironically criticizing a system where the government does not, despite appearances, take care of its people. Not only is this short analysis a typical instance of interpreting Larsen in an Anglo-Saxon framework, it also showcases what kinds of misinterpretations take place when the novel's actual historical, cultural, and economic context – that of early twentieth-century Denmark – is overlooked. What is missing, most importantly, is an understanding of the nuances of the Nordic economic system and how it distinguished – already during Larsen's writing time – from other parts of Europe and,

certainly, from the rest of the world. To elaborate, I want to offer an alternative reading of the passage from *Quicksand*, quoted fully here:

The charm of the old city itself, with its odd architectural mixture of medievalism and modernity, and the *general air of well-being* which pervaded it impressed her. Even in the *so-called poor sections* there was none of that untidiness and squalor which she remembered as the accompaniment of poverty in Chicago, New York, and the Southern cities of America. Here *the door-steps were always white from constant scrubbing, the women neat, and the children washed and provided with whole clothing*. Here were no tatters and rags, no beggars. But, then, begging, she learned, was an offense punishable by law. *Indeed, it was unnecessary in a country where everyone considered it a duty somehow to support himself and his family by honest work; or, if misfortune and illness came upon one, everyone else, including the state, felt bound to give assistance, a lift on the road to the regaining of independence.* (69; emphasis added)

What Helga is witnessing here is the early development of the Nordic welfare state model – the opposite of the “laissez-faire economy” Doyle suggests. The establishment of the Nordic welfare system began as a largely bottom-up movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries across the Nordic region (see Bengtsson), and at the core of its ethos is the idea of communal equality Larsen describes in the passage. It is the “duty” of all citizens to contribute to the community (through “honest work” and taxes), so that those less privileged can be communally helped in the case of

“misfortune and illness” (*Quicksand* 69). Thus, instead of pinpointing “the tension between group and individual in the orthodoxy of Anglo-European modernity” (Doyle, “Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 65), the narration is here providing a remarkably astute description of the ethos behind the Nordic welfare system, which is based on the ideal of positive freedom through equality and independence between individuals of a group. Though similar systems were established in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland at a relatively similar time period, the welfare ethos has been most famously theorized in the context of Sweden as the “Swedish Theory of Love,” which implies

an overarching ambition to liberate the individual citizen from all forms of subordination and dependency in civil society: the poor from charity, the workers from their employers, wives from their husbands, children from parents (and *vice versa* when the parents have become elderly). (Berggren and Trägårdh 53)

Such individualism, acquired through a strong state and government, has also been dubbed “statsindividualism” (statist individualism). What Larsen’s passage describes is therefore not the “orthodoxy” that “is the essence of a racial Saxonism parading as social contract” (65) that Doyle so harshly critiques and sees as the origin of Helga’s race troubles, but the ethos of a society based on equality and independence between members of the state.

Moreover, there seems to be nothing “wry” (Doyle, “Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 65) about Helga’s observations in the passage; on the contrary, she is “impressed” by the Danish system, which is described with a plethora of complimentary terms, from “the general air of well-being” to the “neat” women and “washed” children (*Quicksand* 69).

Instead of Helga mocking the Danish system, she is favorably comparing it to the systematic poverty she has witnessed in major American metropolises: “Even in the so-called poor sections [of Copenhagen] there was none of that untidiness and squalor which she remembered as the accompaniment of poverty in Chicago, New York, and the Southern cities of America” (69). The passage is one of the many instances where Larsen discusses Danish modernity and the modern experience of city-living in Copenhagen as a comparative lens to pinpoint and critique the development of modern America.

Certainly, an astute reader can be skeptical of Helga’s praise – in terms of historical accuracy, Copenhagen was not cured of all poverty in early twentieth century. One could even ask if the reference to the doorsteps that “were always *white* from constant scrubbing” is not also a reference to the racial homogeneity of the idealized Danish state. But the scale of systematic issues such as poverty and how they were handled by the state was (and still is) remarkably different in the U.S. and in the Nordic countries, and *Quicksand* pays much attention to those divergences. In order for scholarship to not gloss over such differences – which I would argue are at the core of *Quicksand’s* political critique – we need transnational research that pays attention to the particularities of various national and linguistic historical contexts.

This small example pinpoints the larger issue of recent attempts to turn modernist studies more transnational. Particularly when such projects are taken on in the context of English Departments, they are typically rooted in the English language and even in the history of England or the former British colonies. This is apparently so even in cases such as Nella Larsen, where the author’s and her novel’s ties are to Denmark and the Danish language, not to England. I will tackle these developments of the globalization,

transnationalization, and geomodernization of modernist studies more extensively in the following chapter, but suffice is to say here that as much as I agree with the project of looking at Larsen from a broader scope than that of an African-American female author, I do believe, along with Hutchinson, Lunde, and Stenport, that Larsen needs to be considered in relation to the places where she had ties to and about which she wrote in her fiction. Not all of Europe, after all, is “Anglo” or “Anglo-Saxon.”

To conclude, what is at stake in a transnational analysis of novels such as *Quicksand* is not only our understanding of the individual texts but their contribution to the modernisms and literary traditions of various regions. To my knowledge, no one has previously noted how Larsen introduces – perhaps as one of the first U.S.-based fiction authors – ideas of the modern Nordic welfare state to an American reading public in the 1920s. *Quicksand* is a significant modernist text not only for its representations of the topics characteristic to U.S. modernism, but also for its comparative and transnational analysis of the development of a modern Nordic state system.

What I have hoped to show here is that a text such as Larsen’s *Quicksand* can be productively analyzed as both a Black Renaissance *and* as a Scandinavian-American modernist text (see also Lunde and Stenport 238). Such a geographic reframing allows us to consider Larsen side by side with other American and Nordic authors who haven’t previously received comparative analysis. In the next section, I will more fully focus on *Quicksand*’s Danish chapters and their commentary on modern cosmopolitanism and transatlantic race relations in order to ask what happens if we move Larsen’s Danish connection from the periphery to the center of the novel’s analysis.

3.3. “HELGA CRANE” IN DENMARK: IMPOSSIBLE COSMOPOLITANISM AND FREEDOM FROM RACE

After unsuccessfully yoyoing around the United States and attempting to find her own identity and a place of belonging in the South, Chicago, and Harlem, Helga decides to travel to Copenhagen to visit her mother’s sister, Aunt Katrina (also referred to as Fru Dahl). This transatlantic travel and Helga’s two-year time in Denmark take place in the middle of the novel, thus splitting her quest in the U.S. into two halves and significantly affecting the development of the text’s major themes.

In his study of the francophone diaspora of the Black Renaissance, Brent Hayes Edwards suggests that

to ask about the function of Paris is to ask a broader set of interrelated questions about the role of outer-national sites even in texts that are putatively the canonical literature of “Harlem.” It is as though certain moves, certain arguments and epiphanies, can only be staged beyond the confines of the United States, and even sometimes in languages other than English. (4-5)

It is precisely this idea of “outer-national” sites such as Paris or, in Helga’s case, Copenhagen, that I want to focus on here in order to ask what are the “moves, arguments, and epiphanies” that *Quicksand* is able to stage and explore only through a Nordic location. As we already saw in the previous example of Helga’s description of poverty in Copenhagen versus American cities, the Danish chapters of *Quicksand* allow Helga and the narration to make comparative social and political commentary about the development of modern living conditions in the U.S. and beyond. Here, I want to further

analyze topics that the narrative can discuss through Helga's travel to a Nordic country: most importantly, Helga's changing construction of her own identity, an exploration of class, gender, and race relations in modernist cosmopolitanism, and a critique of American nationalism and race relations.

The beginning of Helga's time in Denmark is joyful, and her experiences in the country even inspire her to later on "visualize" a possible future in other strange places:

She began to make plans and to dream delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else. Someplace where at last she would be permanently satisfied. Her anticipatory thoughts waltzed and eddied about to the sweet silent music of change. With rapture almost, she let herself drop into the blissful sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated and understood. (*Quicksand* 53)

In Helga's internal focalization, marked by slippages between indirect and free indirect discourse, we have a textbook example of the ideal of modern cosmopolitanism; the notion of freely traveling and finding one's home wherever one goes. Such a humanist, colorblind possibility is echoed throughout the writings of modernist authors and thinkers, and in Helga's case it is pointedly tied to a hope of being finally approved, admired, appreciated, and understood *despite* her race.⁶⁸ The passage is also excessively

⁶⁸ One classic example of such cosmopolitan thinking can be found in the writings of Olavi Paavolainen, who was a central figure in the Finnish modernist group "Tulenkantajat" (Torchbearers) in the 1920s and 30s. Paavolainen was known for his influential and self-reflective writings on modernism, and he often contemplated how modernity is able to create

juopumus tunnosta saada olla yksi monista; ei muukalaisena olon tietoisuus, vaan ylpeä vaikutelma siitä, että on koteutunut kaikkialle, että niin nopeasti pääsee etäisimpäänkin maailmankolkkaan, että viihtyy joka paikassa. (Paavolainen 137-38)

artistic, saturated with poetic language and phrases that some might attribute to the narrator's vocabulary. I want to begin an analysis of Helga's character and the novel's political commentary with this quotation, because it showcases what I will argue is the crux of narration in *Quicksand*; namely, that much of the narration is Helga's own artistic construction of her own identity and life story as "Helga Crane."

While many have admired Larsen's "innovative" narrative style (Hostetler 36) and particularly her modernist use of free indirect discourse, scholars have typically argued that the internal focalization of Helga is left decidedly opaque, flat, or scarce and, furthermore, this stylistic decision is typically attributed to the narrator of the novel. For example, Laura Doyle suggests that the novel's third person narrator keeps a distance to Helga so that the reader's isolated relation to Helga mimics and reinforces Helga's isolation from the other characters and communities around her (69; see also Dittmar 145).⁶⁹ Meanwhile, Lunde and Stenport have argued that *Quicksand* (like J. P. Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*) employs free indirect discourse in order to keep a distance to the protagonist, at times looking at her critically, at times sympathetically (239; see also

an intoxication out of the feeling of being one amongst many; not an awareness of being a stranger, but a proud impression that one has settled everywhere; that so quickly one can reach even the furthest corners of the world; that one thrives everywhere.

In Paavolainen's deliberation of a new, cosmopolitan experience during the modern era, one can find a home anywhere one travels; a cosmopolitan can just as effortlessly wander the streets of Rio de Janeiro and go fishing in the rapids of Oulujoki (149). Not only are geographical distances disappearing with the advancement of trains, radios, and other technology, but people reveal their inherent similarities and adaptability to new locations (137, 149). For a comprehensive analysis of various modernist definitions and critiques of cosmopolitanism, and even a discussion of the impossibilities of black cosmopolitanism in the U.S., see Janet Lyon's "Cosmopolitanism and Modernism."

⁶⁹ Doyle also claims that "Larsen restricts her narrator's access, focalizing only through one character and at crucial moments blocking access even to that character's interiority" ("Liberty, Race, and Larsen" 69). This is not accurate, however, for *Quicksand*'s narrator also focalizes the interiority of a group of Danish women (65), Helga's Uncle Pound (85), as well as her friend Anne Grey (88).

Wagner 138). Though it is true that there are small instances of narrative irony and distance in the first twenty-one chapters of the novel, what I hope to show is that the narrative distance between the narrator and Helga stays quite constant and in fact minimal throughout the novel until the final rural chapters, and that the “distanced” feel we get of Helga is largely a matter of her own doing.

It seems that many interpretations of *Quicksand* have (either consciously or not) followed Dorrit Cohn’s classical account of free indirect discourse that focuses on FID from a narrator’s perspective. Cohn has masterfully shown how FID can function as an exceptional tool for a narrator to take on a character’s idiom and to steer either readerly empathy or irony towards a particular character (Cohn 116-26). Later feminist takes on FID have paid attention to the scholarly privileging of the narrator over the character in the hierarchies of voice and emphasized, instead, how FID readily lends itself to figural voices as well. In an early feminist narratological account, Kathy Mezei has argued how, in novels ranging from *Emma* to *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is a struggle

waged between narrators and character-focalizers for control of the word, the text, and the reader’s sympathy, a struggle paradigmatic of the conflict between conventional gender roles and of the resistance to traditional narrative authority in which a masterly male subject speaks for and over the female object of gaze. (66)

Free indirect discourse can not only function as a battle ground over narrative agency between narrator and character, but moments of FID can also be interpreted as a character becoming a master of their own interiority, artistically constructing their own story and taking narrative control (Mäkelä “Masters of Interiority”; *Uskoton mieli*).

Early on in *Quicksand*, the narration reveals that Helga enjoys storying both herself and the people around her. While surveying the crowds of Chicago,

Helga caught herself wondering who they were, what they did, and of what they thought. What was passing behind those dark molds of flesh? Did they really think at all? Yet, as she stepped out into the moving multicolored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food— sweetbreads, smothered with truffles and mushrooms, perhaps. And, oddly enough, she felt, too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home. (28)

In addition to such moments of curiously wondering the thoughts of others and reflecting her own through them, Helga comes close to what Maria Mäkelä has described as embedded consciousness representation (*Uskoton mieli* 241); a character artistically constructing the mind of another character. In one instance, Helga creates the story of her mother:

But Helga Crane doubted it. How could she [her mother] have been [happy]? A girl gently bred, fresh from an older, more polished civilization, flung into poverty, sordidness, and dissipation. She visualized her now, sad, cold, and—yes, remote. The tragic cruelties of the years had left her a little pathetic, a little hard, and a little unapproachable. (21)

Helga describes her mother like a narrator describing a character. Furthermore, she is right on the verge of slipping into internal focalization of her mother's thoughts but concludes instead that her mother – perhaps as a reflection of Helga herself – is just a little too remote and unapproachable. Similar instances take place elsewhere, as Helga

enjoys to “visualize” (e.g. 21, 53, 110) both herself and the people around her, “rehearse” possible future “scenes” (46) of her life as well as “review” events of the past (21).⁷⁰ It is as if these attempts at artistic storytelling and narrative control are compensatory ways to account for the lack of control and agency Helga has in her life, due to her position as an in-between subject of the color line as well as of multiple geographical lines (South-North, urban-rural, Old world - New world).

These moments of life-storying in free indirect discourse are typically surrounded by phrases of indirect discourse with clear markers indicating that we are reading Helga’s language and thoughts. Phrases such as “caught herself wondering,” “she felt,” “she had learned,” “she knew,” and “she suspected” pop up everywhere in order to maintain a clear tie from any given passage back to Helga. By trailing so close to Helga’s thoughts, it becomes very difficult to argue that we are not witnessing Helga’s language and her own artistic construction of herself and others, for example when she concludes that “She, Helga Crane . . . had no home” (28).

Indeed, I would argue that the curious insistence on referring to the protagonist through both first and family name – as “Helga Crane” – throughout the novel is oftentimes Helga referring to herself in third person.⁷¹ While the narrator chooses more conventional tags such as “Helga” and “she” when taking distance from Helga’s language

⁷⁰ One example of Helga visualizing encounters that end up happening differently in reality: “Many times since turning her back on Naxos she had in fancy rehearsed this scene, this re-encounter. Now she found that rehearsal helped not at all. It was so absolutely different from anything that she had imagined” (46). In another example, Helga recounts and re-narrates past events to herself: “As she reviewed the manner of her departure from his presence, it seemed increasingly rude” (21).

⁷¹ Maria Mäkelä has helpfully argued that in the praxis of interpretation, we often need to overcome the distinction between the authorial and the figural. For example, at times “we need to envisage the character using the third person when referring to himself” (“The Gnomonic Space” 120).

and thoughts, “Helga Crane” often appears in the midst of free indirect discourse and is another indication of Helga considering herself as if from an outsider, narratorial perspective:

Here she was, a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed. And was she to be treated like a secluded young miss, a Danish *frøkken*, not to be consulted personally even on matters affecting her personally? She, Helga Crane, who almost all her life had looked after herself, was she now to be looked after by Aunt Katrina and her husband? It didn't seem real.
(66)

Rather than analyzing the internal focalization as oblique or as showcasing the narrator's decision to keep Helga at bay, what if we allow more agency for Helga in the construction of the narrative? By analyzing these passages as Helga's language, we can begin to see how Helga has been raised to constantly monitor herself through the eyes of others – always as an object “at which people came and gazed.” In a telling moment, Helga momentarily reveals how she has been trained to observe, objectify, and judge herself particularly from the point of view of those who have oppressed or abandoned her:

Worst of all was the fact that under the stinging hurt she understood and sympathized with Mrs. Nilssen's point of view, as always she had been able to understand her mother's, her stepfather's, and his children's points of view. She saw herself for an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden. She understood, even while she resented. (27)

As a person of color who has been rejected by her own family because of her race, Helga has had to monitor herself from a third person's perspective and learn to evaluate herself through the eyes of others. Not only does she understand why her white stepfather and stepsiblings would hate her, but she also sympathizes with their point of view as if she herself was at fault for defying the family's color line. Theories of black ontology discuss such disembodied experiences and the ways in which black people are forced to construct their identity through an encounter with the white gaze (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*; Fanon). In fact, many Renaissance texts have been read as manifestations of these experiences – one of the most famous examples being Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s canonical reading, Hurston is able to master the double consciousness of the African American female experience through a shifting and blending of narratorial and figural voices (“Afterword: Zora Neale”). Whereas Hurston has been lauded for formally thematizing Du Bois's double consciousness from a distinctly female perspective, *Quicksand's* Helga has been interpreted as lacking narrative agency.⁷² I think this undermines the narrative changes and uses of FID that take place in Larsen's novel. Helga's self-objectification and construction of herself from a removed, third person perspective speaks precisely to the experience of being a person of color in a white supremacist world (see Fanon 90-92).

⁷² For example, James Smethurst has compared Larsen's *Quicksand* to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* along this narrative argument. Though the two novels resemble one another in that they are feminist texts about the individual female subject rather than about women's solidarity, Smethurst concludes that Helga Crane “never has the control of the narration that Janie [Crawford] has” in Hurston's novel (211). Though it is true that Hurston's novel perhaps reveals more of Janie's thoughts and language to the reader than *Quicksand* does of Helga, I would argue that both novels use free indirect discourse to give narrative control to their protagonists and discuss the experience of double consciousness. Only in the rural end of *Quicksand* does Helga momentarily lose narrative control, as I will discuss in the following section.

Helga's narrative construction of "Helga Crane" is thus both a reflection of her rehearsed ability to imagine herself from an outsider perspective, as well as an attempt to take some narrative control over her future life.

This interpretation goes against much of *Quicksand* scholarship that sees the narrator as the active agent in the novel, doing the framing *for* Helga. Indeed, a lot of focus has been paid to the multiple ways in which Helga is "framed" in the novel, typically as if in a painting. According to Pamela Barnett, Helga Crane "is recurrently presented as a painting, a sculpture, or a moving exhibition. Like a portrait painter, Larsen's narrator positions Helga inside frames and strategically places her at the center of the settings in which she appears . . . The narrator paints Helga's image with meticulous attention to colors, shadows, and shapes" (575). It is puzzling how all the agency here goes to the narrator, who "positions" and "paints" Helga. Similarly, Johanna M. Wagner mentions how the narrator "manipulates" Helga's "frame," sometimes ironically and with "tongue in cheek" (138). While some scholars have given more credit to Helga's own ability to create and frame herself, these interpretations never extend to the level of narrative agency. Rather, Helga is seen as creating herself through the clothes and other artifacts she surrounds herself with.⁷³ Exemplary is Ann E. Hostetler's article, that explains how

Helga's *illusion* in the beginning of the novel is that she can create herself through a careful arrangement and selection of artifacts: clothes,

⁷³ Johanna M. Wagner provides a helpful summary of such scholarship: "Helga is framed by the look-at-edness or spectacle of her image: see Barnett 1995, Francis 2005, Gray 1994, McLendon 1995, and Wall 1986; by her clothing: see Hostetler 1990 and Roberts 1997; and by her color: see Sherrard-Johnson 2004" (155). Wagner continues this line of research to demonstrate how Helga's framing reveals her "desire to be spectacle rather than spectator" (155).

furnishings, the books with which she surrounds herself. But as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that her aesthetic sense is *passive*: perceiving herself as an object of desire, Helga cannot express her own desires. (36; emphasis added)

Helga's creative agency never surpasses the level of artifacts and, furthermore, this aesthetic sense is judged to be "passive." What I have tried to suggest with a narrative analysis of the novel is that Helga in fact does take a very active role in creating herself – not simply through a painting-like arrangement of herself in the storyworld – but through the act of narrating and artistically constructing her own story in a very literary manner. Closest to this interpretation is Jeanne Scheper, who notes in passing how "Helga is often our narrator in *Quicksand*, since conveniently the inner voice of our protagonist is already engaged in narrativizing the world around her and her life" (683). It is this idea – of Helga as narrating significant parts of the text – that I want to further explore.

What makes the chapters in Denmark significant for this discussion is the fact that the Nordic milieu allows Helga to narrate herself, even if momentarily, as content and to find new venues for self-identification. In the first, urban-based American chapters, "Helga Crane" is associated with a plethora of self-depreciating attributes: "she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto" (16), "just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard" (9). A shift happens once "She, Helga Crane, who had no home" (28) is about to begin her new life in Denmark. At the end of the chapter where Helga arrives in Copenhagen, Helga imagines herself almost as if a literary heroine, about to begin a new chapter not just of the novel, but of her life: "It had begun, a new life for Helga Crane"

(61). Helga experiences similar fits of optimism whenever she is about to leave for a new place, but the migration to Denmark seems to – at first – fulfill her aspirations better than any other region so far.

In fact, the very beginning of the Danish section even reads like a staged play – perhaps because of Henrik Ibsen’s influence:

now that her aunt had finished kissing her and exclaimed in Danish: “Little Helga! Little Helga! Goodness! But how you have grown!” Laughter from all three. “Welcome to Denmark, to Copenhagen, to our home,” said the new uncle in queer, proud, oratorical English. And to Helga’s smiling, grateful “Thank you,” he returned: “Your trunks? Your checks?” also in English, and then lapsed into Danish. (60)

The scene, interspersed with details about the linguistic exchanges between English and Danish as well as small descriptions such as “Laughter from all three,” sounds like the dialogue and stage instructions of a scene about to be acted. Furthermore, Helga seems to intertextually enter through the “Dahls” house into Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879) (Lunde and Stenport 240; Davis 266), where she quite literally becomes a prized doll as her aunt dresses her up in the most extravagant clothes and shows her around to Danish cultural circles.⁷⁴ What brings joy to Helga’s life at last is the fact that Denmark provides her with the “beautiful surroundings” where she can imagine a new kind of “Helga Crane”:

⁷⁴ At the end of Ibsen’s *Et dukkehjem* (*A Doll’s House*), the protagonist, Nora, produces a critique of patriarchal societal relations by arguing that she has been treated like a doll all her life, first by her father and then by her husband.

Always she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things. So it was more than pleasant, it was important, this awakening in the great high room which held the great high bed on which she lay, small but exalted. It was important because to Helga Crane it was the day, so she decided, to which all the sad forlorn past had led, and from which the whole future was to depend. This, then, was where she belonged. This was her proper setting. She felt consoled at last for the spiritual wounds of the past. (61-62)

Free indirect discourse shows, again, how Helga imagines herself from a narratorial perspective, as a character who simply needed to find “her proper setting.”⁷⁵ Copenhagen provides Helga with agency to “decide” how the rest of her life’s narrative will play out.

Closely tied with Helga’s renewed ability to construct herself is the fact that the Danish location allows her to self-identify as a cosmopolitan traveler. Through Helga’s transatlantic migration, the novel is able to produce commentaries on the ideals and realities of cosmopolitanism. Narrative form plays a key part here, too: the Danish chapters are much longer than the first ones in Naxos and Chicago, and include detailed

⁷⁵ Wagner reads this scene as an example of Helga’s queer desire not for heterosexual relations but for various nonhuman “things”: “It is important to note that it is not her distant, Danish relations, Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul, who provide a sense of belonging, but the material extravagance and the subsequent attention and admiration she receives that make her feel at home” (135).

For more queer interpretations of representations of sexuality in Larsen’s writing, see Blackmore, Doyle (“Transnational History”), and McDowell. Susan S. Lanser has called for a formalist queer reading of authors such as Larsen by suggesting that “It might be worth putting to the narratological test D. A. Miller’s proposal that formal innovation may be the displaced project of queer fiction. Is it accidental, for example, that Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Marcel Proust, Colette, Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes, Katherine Mansfield, and Gertrude Stein – and maybe James Joyce – were queer(ish) folk as well as modernists who pioneered the practice of FID?” (“Toward a Queerer” 31).

descriptions of, for example, Copenhagen streets, architecture, living styles (such as biking), as well as Danish food culture (like smørrebrød). George Hutchinson has analyzed how historically accurate *Quicksand's* descriptions of Danish life are (*In Search Of* 69-70), and indeed the middle section of the novel at times resembles a cosmopolitan travel guide. At the center of it all is Helga, who becomes both an experienced traveler and a sort of modern female flâneur, as she enjoys walking around the city streets of Copenhagen and detailing all the Danish sights.⁷⁶

Rather than uncritically idealizing cosmopolitan travel, however, the novel shows its connection to class elitism. Helga's self-identification as a Danish cosmopolitan becomes a source of cultural and social capital for her (see Bourdieu) – a fact that is particularly highlighted once she returns to Harlem. At a New York gathering, Helga gloats to an old fiancé how

I was awfully glad to get back, but I wouldn't live here [in Harlem] always. I couldn't. I don't think that any of us who've lived abroad for any length of time would ever live here altogether again if they could help it. . . . Oh, I don't mean tourists who rush over to Europe and rush all over the Continent and rush back to America thinking they know Europe. I mean people who've actually lived there, actually lived among the people. (94)

Helga does not refer to a concrete "us" in the house party she is attending but to an imagined "us" of true cosmopolitans who are *more* than tourists, who "actually lived among the people." While I do not mean to argue that Denmark is simply a way for

⁷⁶ Scheper has argued that Larsen uses Helga to discuss "that quintessential figure of modernism, the flâneur" in *Quicksand* (679). Scheper's analysis of Helga as a New Negro flâneur focuses on the American passages of the novel – particularly the Harlem and Chicago chapters – and leaves out Helga's flâneur moments in Denmark.

Helga (or Larsen) to gain popularity in the black circles of Harlem or to produce some sort of self-illusion of whiteness, the narration does point out the privileges that cosmopolitan travel demands and the elitism that it can ignite. Transatlantic migration is a positive and privileged opportunity for someone like Helga, who can travel to visit her extended family in Denmark as a free citizen of the country. As Brent Hayes Edwards underlines, “the level of the international is accessed unevenly by subjects with different historical relations to the nation” (7) and, for Helga, the Nordic experience is both legally and materially accessible in a completely different manner than it would be for a tourist or a formerly colonized subject.

Quicksand produces an even harsher critique of cosmopolitanism by paying attention to how axes of race and gender affect Helga during her time in Denmark. For a plethora of early twentieth-century African American authors, Europe presented itself as a haven from the everyday racism of America, and many described such experiences in their writings. W. E. B. Du Bois even starts his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by detailing the “strange experience” of being a problem in society – an experience he has never escaped, “save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe” (2). Helga entertains similar hopes towards the end of her sea-journey across the Atlantic; Helga believes that Copenhagen will return to her a “feeling of happiness and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (58). The mere idea of Copenhagen allows Helga to indulge in “day-dreams of a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice” (51). Helga’s idea of a Copenhagen without “Negroes” and “prejudice” implies that she hopes to shed her own racial identity upon

arrival, since being a “Negro” is a subject position particular to the United States during Helga’s (and Larsen’s) time period.

This perpetual longing to free herself from race and ultimately failing at it is one of the most commented aspects of *Quicksand*. Many scholars have pointed out how Denmark lets Helga down because, instead of being prejudice-free, it produces another kind of racism from that of the United States; one where Helga is objectified and exoticized because of her dark skin (see Barnett; Hostetler; Hutchinson *In Search of*; Lunde and Stenport; Sherrard-Johnson “A Plea for Color”; Silverman; Rayson; Walker). The Danish chapters are filled with examples of how the people around Helga objectify her and treat her as an exotic possession, and how passers-by on the street whisperingly call her “*Den Sorte*” (“the black”) (67).⁷⁷ As Jeanne Scheper notes, Larsen “does not simply set up a predictable narrative of modern cosmopolitanism that contrasts the limiting small-town experience to the expansive tumult of the metropolis” (679). Instead, the promises of modernist mobility in *Quicksand* “remain haunted by the histories of racial violence,” even as movement represents a mode of agency and resistance for Helga, as it did for many other modernist women (Scheper 679, 682). Towards the end of the Danish chapters, Helga ends up becoming almost as restless in Denmark as she was

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the somewhat grammatically strange phrase “Den Sorte,” see Martyn Bone, who points out that the definite article “Den” signifies Helga as *the* black, suggesting Helga is “racially singular and unique, despite the presence of other blacks in early twentieth-century Copenhagen” (215, 224). Other *Quicksand* characters also imply that there are no other biracial people in Copenhagen, although, as Lunde and Stenport have argued, by the early twentieth century a substantial number of African servants and nannies, some from the Danish West Indies, had moved to Copenhagen (232). According to Lunde and Stenport, *Quicksand* is silent about Denmark’s “historical role in the global economy of the slave trade” (239) and thus the novel mimics and “critiques a lingering silence with respect to Denmark’s conflicted relationship to its own colonial past” (228).

previously in Naxos, Chicago, and New York, and decides to take a break by making a short trip back to Harlem.

By critiquing colorblind and idealized versions of cosmopolitanism, *Quicksand* not only shows the impossibility of cosmopolitan belonging for a biracial woman, but the novel also “pointedly revise[s] the uses of Europe as an interracial haven in other American novels with black or mulatto heroines” (Hutchinson, “Subject to Disappearance” 185). In many American interracial literary texts, an escape to Europe gives the interracial character “a happy alternative to tragic America” (Sollors, *Neither Black nor* 338-39) but, for Helga, even Denmark is not able to provide her with the freedom from race she desperately longs for (Doyle, “Liberty, Race, and Larsen” 69; “Transnational History” 551).⁷⁸

Despite this failure, Denmark still functions as a significant lens for Helga to consider the horrors of American racism. The thought of returning to the U.S. permanently sends her into a sensation of shock and nausea, as she reminiscences the experience of being black in America:

Go back to America, where they hated Negroes! To America, where Negroes were not people. To America, where Negroes were allowed to be beggars only, of life, of happiness, of security. To America, where everything had been taken from those dark ones, liberty, respect, even the labor of their hands. To America, where, if one had Negro blood, one

⁷⁸ Rather than being able to become a cosmopolitan traveler, the novel shows how Helga’s migratory nature is more in line with another racialized and oppressed group in Europe; namely, the Romani people. Sherrard-Johnson has argued that “Larsen associates Helga, and African Americans, with gypsies, a significant allusion given the European- Scandinavian context. Gypsies have been Europe’s racialized other since their arrival in England at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The migratory connotations of the word gypsy identify a lifestyle that reiterates the alienation and dislocation Helga experiences” (“A Plea for Color” 866).

mustn't expect money, education, or, sometimes, even work whereby one might earn bread. Perhaps she was wrong to bother about it now that she was so far away. Helga couldn't, however, help it. Never could she recall the shames and often the absolute horrors of the black man's existence in America without *the quickening of her heart's beating and a sensation of disturbing nausea. It was too awful. The sense of dread of it was almost a tangible thing in her throat.* (75-76; emphasis added)

It is not simply that Europe “merely displays a different kind of racism” for Helga (Hutchinson, *In Search of* 235), but that the way in which race is institutionalized in the U.S. is fundamentally different from Denmark. By living in a country with no Jim Crow, Helga is able to see the “horrors of the black man's existence in America” from a new, distanced perspective. What *Quicksand's* comparative and transnational account of race speaks to is the difference between the type of systematic and institutional racism of a country such as the United States on the one hand, and the encounters with ignorant, prejudiced, or racist individuals in a country such as Denmark on the other. Though Helga is made to feel different and uncomfortable during her time in Copenhagen, her internal focalization reveals that to exist in the Jim Crow United States – where the ability to participate in society and gain “money,” “education,” or even “work” is significantly compromised for a black subject – is perhaps worse.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ While Larsen scholarship has moved past the phase of altogether downplaying the role of Denmark in Larsen's life and in *Quicksand*, it is still easy to find examples of research that argue for the similarity of the American and Danish parts of Helga's life – as if Denmark was just an extension and continuation of what Helga experiences in the U.S. For example, Rafael Walker argues that “[t]he objectifying attentions of Olsen and his [Danish] countrymen produce the same depersonalizing effects for Helga as the racial policing in the United States” (174). Consequently, though the reasons for Helga's objectification differ in the two countries, their “effect for her is the same” (174). What I have hoped to show here is that both the cultural context and the effects

I want to quickly discuss the final sentences of the above passage, marked in italics, because they showcase a final, significant aspect of Helga's self-construction. The descriptions of Helga's "nausea" as well as the sensations she feels in her heart and throat are one of the rare instances where the novel provides us with language about what Helga is feeling in her own embodied experience. To analyze this instance, it is helpful to bring in Genie Babb's distinction of bodily representations in literature into aspects of "Körper" and "Leib." Following the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who theorized the body as involving two aspects – "the physical, objectified body ['Körper'] studied by science – the sense of the body inherited from Descartes; and 'Leib,' the lived sensation of embodiment" – Babb suggests applying a similar distinction to our study of literary characters' bodies (189-99).⁸⁰

The vast majority of *Quicksand* focuses on Helga's Körper – her physical body as an object to be studied and looked at – both via other characters' objectifying gazes and utterances, *as well as* through Helga's own focus on imagining herself from an outsider perspective. In contrast, there are only a few cases where Helga's Leib, her own bodily

for Helga *are* different in the U.S. and in Denmark, and acknowledging those differences is central to understanding the novel's political commentary (see also Andreassen 96). The point is not to claim that institutional racism does not exist in Denmark, but to point out that the novel discusses the *differences* in the ways in which race and racism function in different locations.

⁸⁰ Babb bases her theory on a criticism of a lack of proper character theory particularly within narratology. Because most narratological models conceive of character as either action or interiority, characters' bodies are either completely ignored or relegated "to the ornamental space of description, which is in turn neglected because of its supposed spatiality and lack of congruence with narrative as a temporal, linguistic activity" (197). Similar critiques have been made by other feminist narratologists, such as Susan S. Lanser, who points out how narratology's thinnest contribution so far has been in terms of character theory ("Toward a (Queerer)" 37).

being, is narrated.⁸¹ The sentences marked in italics in the previous passage are one such fleeting moment of Leib, and I would argue that these cases are perhaps the truest or most authentic aspects of Helga we get to see behind the otherwise very neatly constructed façade of “Helga Crane.” While other characters, the narrator, and the reader can look at Helga’s Körper from a distance, only through internal focalization can we witness moments of Helga’s own internal sensations. It is the Danish location and the possibility of having to return to the horrors of the U.S. that allows us a rare, closer look into Helga’s interiority and experiences of Leib.

Thus, Denmark provides the platform for *Quicksand* to develop Helga’s self-construction – both as a happier “Helga Crane” and as a biracial woman torn to pieces by the mere idea of black existence in America. This is coupled with the novel’s discussion of how class, gender, and race affect the very modernist hope for cosmopolitan and transnational belonging.

Finally, I want to note how Denmark also allows Helga to verbalize a sophisticated critique of American patriotism within the black circles of Harlem and beyond:

Nevertheless she felt a slightly pitying superiority over those Negroes who were apparently so satisfied. And she had a fine contempt for the blatantly patriotic black Americans. Always when she encountered one of those picturesque parades in the Harlem streets, the Stars and Stripes streaming ironically, insolently, at the head of the procession, tempered for her, a

⁸¹ Ann Hostetler pays attention to some of Helga’s bodily sensations – hunger in Chicago, the dizzy thrill of dance in New York (38-39) – but she doesn’t note how few such instances are, or how they contrast with the Körper descriptions of Helga.

little, her amusement at the childish seriousness of the spectacle. It was too pathetic. (90)

Helga's harsh critique of the "pathetic" and "blatantly patriotic black Americans" is significant, given the novel's publication and celebration as a Black Renaissance text in the U.S. Many African American authors of the time were focused on the dual issue of being both black and American. Particularly for the more middle class strand – often represented by figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, and the general line of the *The Crisis* magazine – the discourse of racial uplift was combined with both "an emphasis on the distinctiveness of black American experience" and with "American cultural nationalism" (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 155). Jessie Fauset's fiction presents an interesting point of comparison to Larsen in this manner, since Fauset, too, traveled extensively in Europe, spoke multiple languages, and lived a middle-class life in Harlem during the same time period as Larsen. However, for some of Fauset's literary characters, such as Richard Winter in "There Was One Time!: A Story of Spring," a return from Europe to the United States represents the heroism and possibilities of racial uplift (Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 154-55; "Subject to Disappearance" 185). Hutchinson has suggested that in some of Fauset's fiction "the answer to racism in American life is not alienation from one's race *or* country, but rather a reenvisioning of that race and that country, a pride precisely in the Americanness of the American Negro and the blackness of the 'true' America" (*The Harlem Renaissance* 154).⁸² Larsen in

⁸² This notion of the blackness of American culture was significant to the Renaissance movement. In the words of Hutchinson, "More important than the idea of the traditional Africanness of African American culture to the Harlem Renaissance was the idea that black Americans, unlike any other group, had been almost completely stripped of their ancestral cultural identity, and precisely because of this had developed the most authentically *American* folk culture" (*The Harlem Renaissance* 76). What makes American culture distinct is the way racism and black

Quicksand, on the other hand, presents an oppositional case to bourgeois patriotism and dedication to the American nation-state.⁸³ It is precisely alienation both from one's country and from one's race that marks the starting and ending point of the novel. For Helga, the U.S. is never able to create a permanent sense of home. Instead, it is only a constant movement that momentarily eases her pain, and thus *Quicksand* becomes dedicated to an ethos of transnationalism. Perhaps Helga's own critique of mere tourism in Europe plays a part here, too; instead of Europe functioning as a momentary tourist destination and as a way to strengthen her ties to the American nation, Denmark provides her with new feelings of belonging and an ability to criticize the U.S. from a distance.

To an extent, Larsen differs in this sense not only from her African American contemporaries, but from a broader trend of U.S.-based authors who, in the early twentieth century, were interested in cultural pluralism and expanding the notion of what it means to be an "American." In *Ethnic Modernism*, Werner Sollors has studied how

culture have informed one another, making African Americans the best cultural authority of the country (75). This idea is echoed throughout the works of Renaissance thinkers, perhaps most famously in Alain Locke's title essay of *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, where he "presents the African-American as the true patriot, embodying American democratic ideals" (Sanders 138; see also Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance* 78-93).

⁸³ Somewhat ironically, Larsen's *Quicksand* was very favorably reviewed by Du Bois and others who represent some of the African American groups that *Quicksand* critiques along class and racial lines. Hutchinson has explained how the "positive" response to the novel was based on "a class bias and an ethos of uplift" that were at odds with Larsen's point of view (*In Search of* 293). These early (mis)interpretations resulted from the fact that Larsen was favorably contrasted to two other contemporary publications: Carl van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928). While van Vechten and McKay were attacked for their focus on working-class blacks and the sensational nightlife of Harlem, Larsen's *Quicksand* seemed more bourgeois and respectable in comparison. For a re-reading of Du Bois' review of McKay, see Vogel (136-37).

Interestingly, James Smethurst has pointed out that even the comparisons between McKay and van Vechten were misleading: "While Claude McKay's first published novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928) was often associated with Van Vechten's novel as a salacious misrepresentation of Harlem life, it was in many respects an answer to *Nigger Heaven*, presenting the black intellectual as capable of connecting with the best in the folk spirit and showing the epitome of that spirit as being far from anti- intellectual and contemplative" (205).

The cultural work of recasting the United States as a multiethnic country was undertaken by American ethnic writers in the period . . . American ethnic writers were increasingly drawn to ethnic pluralism or at least to a broader definition of the American “host culture” to which immigrants and minorities were to be “assimilated.” Like the Russian-born Mary Antin or the Slovenian-American Louis Adamic, they may not have been in the forefront of aesthetic modernism, but they fought for a redefinition of America (13)

As we saw in the previous chapter, Willa Cather, too, fits into this category of ethnic modernists who attempted to imagine a more pluralistic and diverse understanding of American culture. Thea, the Nordic immigrant and native-like protagonist of *The Song of the Lark* exemplifies a more ethnically diverse and thus also culturally prolific version of the U.S. Meanwhile, Larsen’s *Quicksand* is not interested in partaking in such reconceptualizations, at least as long as they are indebted to or prioritize the idea of the American nation-state. For Helga Crane, a country defined and institutionalized according to the color line cannot be reconceptualized in a way that would allow and include her biracial existence.

To conclude, the comparative lens Helga and the novel adopt when considering race, gender, and class relations both in the U.S. and Denmark produces poignant political critiques, but the novel also discusses how Helga becomes trapped in a “shuttlelike” identity between multiple geographic regions and their differing social relations:

This knowledge, this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive. It was, too, as she was uncomfortably aware, even a trifle ridiculous, and mentally she caricatured herself moving shuttle-like from continent to continent. From the prejudiced restrictions of the New World to the easy formality of the Old, from the pale calm of Copenhagen to the colorful lure of Harlem. (89-90)

Helga remains as an in-between subject, longing for the spiritual kinship of other black Harlemites, while also wanting the kinship she has to her white Danish relatives and the physical freedoms Denmark provides her with.⁸⁴ Again, geographical and racial indeterminacy become intertwined. In his recent discussion of biraciality in Larsen's two novels, Rafael Walker argues that *Quicksand* and *Passing* explore two different paradigms of "attempting to live out a biracial existence in a racially polarized society" (168). In *Quicksand*, that paradigm is "synthesis," where "the character tries to live out biraciality through synthesizing black identity with white, attempting to exist as both black and white" at the same time (168). This synthesizing attempt for Helga is entwined with her wish to exist geographically both in the U.S. and in Denmark. Such an attempt turns out to be untenable and, as Helga herself has to admit, "a trifle ridiculous." Towards the end of her stay in Denmark, free indirect discourse reveals her increasingly depressing thoughts in the midst of these issues: "Frankly the question came to this: what

⁸⁴ Interestingly, Hutchinson points out that Larsen's descriptions of Helga correlate with immigrant representations by Scandinavian-American authors: "Like Larsen's *Quicksand*, Scandinavian American immigrant novels with American-born protagonists regularly dwell on their heroines' feelings of being 'betwixt and between'—going to Scandinavia in hopes of finding a sense of belonging that they lack in America, only to discover that they do not, after all, fit in" (Hutchinson, *In Search of* 74).

was the matter with her? . . . Why couldn't she be happy, content, somewhere? Other people managed, somehow, to be. To put it plainly, didn't she know how? Was she incapable of it?" (75). These questions lead Helga to try and find both racial and geographic unity in a final destination: Christian and rural small town America.

3.4. "THE GIRL" IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND THE ENSLAVING REPRODUCTION OF RACE AND FAMILY

Quicksand begins and ends with the rural South: Chapters 1-3 take place in an all-black Southern school, Naxos, where Helga works as a teacher, while Chapters 22-25 are set in an unnamed rural small town in Alabama, where Helga ends up after a religious conversion and marriage to a priest. Thus, the rural envelopes the entire novel and Helga's travels in both metropolitan America and Copenhagen. In this final section of the chapter, I will comment on and expand previous interpretations of the novel's ending by paying attention to the narrator's relation to the rural setting and by illuminating some of the intertextual connections the rural part of Larsen's novel has to Nordic modernism. The point is to show how the rural in *Quicksand* is not some separate, marginal part of the novel but deeply intertwined with the urban sections of it. The rural is shaped by the same forces of modernity as Harlem and Copenhagen, though with differing consequences. As Laura Doyle has noted, the unevenness of the development of modernity is not "merely territorial . . . here progress, there stagnation—but rather matrixial and generative—underdevelopment here *fosters* development there" ("Transnational History" 533). While events such as urbanization, the establishment of Jim Crow, and the Great Migration led to the development of racialized spaces in cities

like New York and Chicago, those same processes of modernization left behind places in the rural South that *Quicksand* represents as stagnating and repressive.

Scholars have often seen *Quicksand* as a largely urban novel and many have found the text's ending surprising and unfitting for the rest of the plot. This is an interpretation I find particularly interesting, given that both on thematic and formal levels, the novel returns to where it began and thus provides circular closure. In terms of theme, the novel begins and ends with critiques of the religious South and the social reproductive labor of women in such spaces. In Naxos, Helga ironically judges a white preacher whom the faculty and students of the school are forced to listen to. While Helga has to witness "that holy white man of God [speaking] to the black folk sitting so respectfully before him" (2), she criticizes the ways in which Southern religiosity is used to keep black people in an inferior position in society. At the end of the novel, Helga marries a black priest and turns into his child-bearing housewife, and the narrator steps forth to produce a critique of how Southern religiosity functions as an additional system that keeps black women in their reproductive place. In fact, in both rural parts of the text, Helga is trapped in the gendered labor of social reproduction.⁸⁵ In Naxos, she is an

⁸⁵ Social reproduction refers to the making of people within and for a capitalist society. It includes labor such as childbearing, educating, and nursing – labor that is typically gendered, done by women, and unpaid or underpaid. As Arruzza et al. explain, not only does social reproduction "create and sustain life in the biological sense; it also creates and sustains our capacity to work—or what Marx called our 'labor power.' And that means fashioning people with the 'right' attitudes, dispositions, and values – abilities, competences, and skills. All told, people-making work supplies some fundamental preconditions – material, social, cultural for human society in general and for capitalist production in particular. Without it neither life nor labor power could be embodied in human beings" (21).

Such gendered people-making labor was seen as central to the role of black women in the New Negro Movement, as well. For example, Elise Johnson McDougald, in her 1925 essay "The Task of Negro Womanhood," calls for a black womanliness that nurtures others. As Sherrard-Johnson has analyzed, McDougald "draws from sentimental representations of African American women as teachers, homemakers, or nurses" who should engage in supporting the uplift endeavors of the

undervalued educator with no energy “after her taxing day’s work, after the hard classes, in which she gave willingly and unsparingly of herself with no apparent return” (1). Helga even contemplates on “the smallness of her commercial value” (32) and ultimately ends up doing the unpaid work of child-labor and household chores in poverty-stricken rural Alabama.

Narrative form is also different in the rural chapters. For the majority of the novel, focalization stays close to Helga and the heterodiegetic narrator takes only momentarily and implicitly a position of narrative distance to her. *Quicksand*’s narrator is not the type of omniscient narrator I studied in the previous chapter – one that has a clearly personal voice separate from the characters in the storyworld. Instead, the narrator is what many would consider more canonically modernist, and I would argue that longer instances of clear narratorial commentary and distance take place only in the very beginning and end of the novel. On the opening pages of *Quicksand* that distance is fleeting, as the narrator introduces Helga in Naxos by asking the readers to gaze, objectify, and even eroticize her like an outside “observer” (1). When Helga moves to rural Alabama in the final chapters, the narrator returns to this distanced gaze and takes on a clearly separate position from Helga, didactically narrating the moral of the story and deeming Helga unfit to narrate it herself.

Before analyzing the rural chapters and these narrative choices further, I want to take a moment to explain how the countryside has been previously studied in relation to

New Negro men, who in turn were considered the race “leaders” of the movement (“A Plea for Color” 840).

Apart from her short writing career, Nella Larsen worked her entire life in the realm of social reproduction as an educator (a teacher and a librarian) and as a nurse. For previous readings of *Quicksand*’s relation to capitalism and consumer culture, see Carby, Goldsmith, and Rhodes.

Black Renaissance authors and how Larsen fits into those conceptualizations. In the previous chapter I included an overview of the (white) history of American regional writing from local color literature of the nineteenth century to some of the modernist regional traditions of early twentieth century, such as revolt from the village authors and Cather's multicultural take on regionalism. When it comes to rural representations in the African American literary canon, scholars have typically analyzed texts that deal with the rural South. James Smethurst, for example, has highlighted how central the "migration narrative" from the rural South to the urban North is to American modernism at large. Smethurst traces the origin of the migration narrative from the fugitive slave stories of the nineteenth century (first written by white authors), to the slave narratives of black authors (autobiographical works by figures like Fredrick Douglass) and, finally, to the post-reconstruction Jim Crow era narratives of the Great Migration (100). The migration narrative that describes "the movement from a provincial, often rural ancestral home in the South to the northern metropolis" became a dominant form of African American culture in the twentieth century (95; see also Griffin 3).

The literary tradition of migration narratives and the movements of the Great Migration are visible in *Quicksand*, too. As Jeanne Scheper explains:

Helga Crane's migrations from the Southern states to the Northern states and her trans-Atlantic relocations from the U.S. to Europe and back again, reflect historic population flows: the movement of blacks from south to north during what became known as the Great Migration as well as the trans-Atlantic intellectual and artistic circuits between African American and European artists that is constitutive of modernism. These early

twentieth-century movements reference, echo, and are the direct result of the not-so-distant “trans-Atlanticism” of the slave trade. (683)

While Scheper separates Helga’s domestic travel in the U.S. from her transatlantic journey and notes the centrality of the latter to modernism, Smethurst has convincingly argued that the establishment of the American South-North axis through the development of the African American migration narrative has been equally constitutive of modernism. For Smethurst, representations of the rural South - urban North axis and its related anxieties about race and culture are not marginal to modernism but played a significant part in the development of both black and white modernist traditions:

The initial black migration narratives, like the later poetry of Dunbar, are forerunners of a certain modernist sensibility in U.S. and European fiction. The protagonists of the early migration narratives in their yo-yoing between North and South, black and white, citizen and some other less classifiable status, private space and public space, are radically divided intellectually. The sort of radical alienation and fragmentation that will come to be associated with artistic modernism is here writ large and early. (122)

In other words, Smethurst’s claim is that Harlem Renaissance authors and their black predecessors were in some respect the first authors of American modernism, deeply affecting canonical white modernist authors from Fitzgerald to Stein. He categorizes Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* as one of the later, twentieth-century migration novels along with Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), and Claude

McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) (Smethurst 112). In these modernist migration novels, black and interracial protagonists are trapped in an endless rootlessness, permanently yoyoing from place to place "with no lasting connection to family or soil" and without any genuine resolution "except perhaps through death (or something like a social death)" (112).

Despite the great role migration narratives played in the history of American modernisms, the Black Renaissance movement was somewhat split about the use of rural and folk representations. Some major Renaissance figures, such as Alain Locke, had class- and region-based prejudices against rural and lower-class blacks, even when rural folk culture was taken to some degree to represent the "native" material of African American art (Fabre and Feith 16). Such views reveal the more complex splits along generational lines in the Renaissance movement; while intellectual framers of the movement – for example Locke or Du Bois – attempted to conceptualize what the New Negro should look like, younger Renaissance authors rebelled on multiple fronts:⁸⁶

As irritation increased against the prescriptions and guidelines set on artistic expression, and against the New Negro credo, the dissidents became more defiant and iconoclastic. McKay's objections tended to center on issues of class, whereas Hurston's and Hughes's revolved more on faithfulness to, and recognition of, folk culture. (Fabre and Feith 22)

⁸⁶ There was, of course, a generational difference even between Du Bois and Locke; the former has often been framed as part of the older and more conservative generation of the movement than Locke, who was considered a new voice especially after the publication of *The New Negro*. Still, Locke was dedicated to black bourgeois values throughout his life (see Stewart), unlike many of the younger Renaissance artists.

Younger figures of the movement, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, were more dedicated to representations of the rural folk and strongly adopted the blues and folk idiom into their poetics (Fabre and Feith viii). Larsen's *Quicksand* is a peculiar case in this context because, while it flirts with ideas of the rural black folk, its first and final chapters ultimately opt for a disillusioned view of the countryside. Thadious Davis has noted how "Helga mistakenly anticipates finding her inspiration among the common, ordinary folk of the rural South, as some in the Harlem Renaissance clearly believed" (275). Helga does indeed anticipate finding a solution to her life in the South, although it is perhaps kin, rather than inspiration, that she is looking for. Helga's yoyoing throughout the novel is deeply tied to a search for kin – the definition of which she constantly changes – until she attempts to form a community one final time by becoming the reproductive machine of a biological and patriarchal nuclear family that respects the color line. In the writings of many Renaissance authors, intraracial heterosexuality is a (seeming) way back into an authentic African American identity, particularly for biracial characters (Smethurst 200). It is this route of intraracial heterosexuality that Helga chooses (or rather is forced to choose) as her final option for making both identity and kin for herself – and it is the rural South and its black folk that initially inspire her in this decision.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ In this way, *Quicksand*'s resolution is opposite to that of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, where the interracial protagonist decides to reject the black folk and pass as white. As Smethurst analyzes, "at the end of the novel we are left with the ex-colored man wracked with regret because he never attempted to bridge the gap between the two parts of his consciousness, which are not really black and white so much as different modalities of being black" (121). While the protagonist's decision to reject the black community leaves him isolated in Johnson's text, Helga reaches for the opposite solution: turning to the folk and the all-black rural community apart from the white world.

As Davis argues, this is indeed a mistaken hope on Helga's behalf, for *Quicksand's* ending shows that the novel does not believe that the folk of the rural South can provide solutions for a biracial woman like Helga. Indeed, while Larsen fits well within Smethurst's study of urban-rural migratory texts in African American literature, she differs quite strongly from authors such as Hurston who are typically considered the true rural, regional, or folk representatives of the Black Renaissance. Despite the fact that both Larsen's *Quicksand* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* center on a migrating, biracial female protagonist, their stances on rural South are far apart. Hurston's novel is dedicated to the folk culture and the vernacular of the rural South. Meanwhile, there is no vernacular in Helga's vocabulary, and "[t]he narrative surface of *Quicksand* is richly encrusted with symbols chosen from the object world of haute-bourgeois culture; black folk culture is significantly absent" (Hostetler 44-45). Instead of being interested in the folkways of local Alabaman inhabitants, Helga becomes like Carol Milford in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*; an urban woman who moves to the countryside and showcases a sense of cultural superiority towards the small town folk she wishes to educate. Helga, for the first time in the novel, even adopts the language of racial uplift as she imagines how she will help out the poor local people (110). Perhaps Larsen's portrayal of the countryside – which has often been described as tragic – speaks to some sort of class bias as well.

What I want to focus on in the remainder of this chapter is a narrative analysis of the rural parts of Larsen's novel. What is the countryside employed for in *Quicksand* (if not to elevate rural black people and folk culture), what kinds of political critiques stem from it, and how is it narrated? What is perhaps most striking about the rural ending of

the novel is the change in tone and distance that the narrator takes – something that has received far too little critical attention in Larsen scholarship. Starting from the first paragraph of the Alabama chapters, the narrator takes on extreme narrative irony and distance, juxtaposing Helga’s confused and thus unreliable thoughts with the ugly reality of marrying a “fattish yellow man” of a “primitive flock”:

And so in the confusion of seductive repentance Helga Crane was married to the grandiloquent Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, that fattish yellow man who had so kindly, so unctuously, proffered his escort to her hotel on the memorable night of her conversion. With him she willingly, even eagerly, left the sins and temptations of New York behind her to, as he put it, “labor in the vineyard of the Lord” in the tiny Alabama town where he was pastor to a scattered and primitive flock. (109)

Throughout the countryside chapters, the narrator continuously questions Helga’s decision to move to the rural small town. Over and over again, the narrator’s “objective” descriptions of the surrounding environment are contrasted with Helga’s subjective, positive vocabulary and attempts to daydream the horrid reality away. A change from urban to rural scenery brings out a new narrative style, where free indirect discourse reigns and is used both to ironically scrutinize Helga’s (bad) decisions as well as to reveal the cracks behind her façade:

The smallest, dirtiest, brown child, barefooted in the fields or muddy roads, was to her an emblem of the wonder of life, of love, and of God’s goodness. (112)

In the certainty of [her husband's] goodness, his righteousness, his holiness, Helga somehow overcame her first disgust at the odor of sweat and stale garments. She was even able to be unaware of it. . . she was, she told herself, proud and gratified that he belonged to her. In some strange way she was able to ignore the atmosphere of self-satisfaction which poured from him like gas from a leaking pipe. (113)

Even if Helga is able to be “unaware” and “ignore” the disgusting nature of her husband and surrounding town, the narrator makes sure that the reader judges the rural setting from a different perspective. At the same time, these moments of internal focalization also point to the possible ambivalence in Helga’s own position – is she truly unaware of the real matter of things, or is she simply “telling herself” (113) what to think and what to ignore? The narrator seems to suggest that it does not even matter, for the narration repeatedly uses phrases that undermine Helga’s cognitive abilities altogether. According to the narrator, Helga “failed to blame” her husband for thoughtless selfishness when he spends time with the “adoring women of his flock” (115), while she also does not realize that she keeps birthing children due to a husband who is constantly aroused by the flattery he receives from the other women in town:

Helga might have amused herself by tracing the relation of this constant ogling and flattering to the proverbially large families of preachers; the often disastrous effect on their wives of this constant stirring of the senses by extraneous women. (111)

Helga “might,” but does not, understand such connections, and therefore the narrator delivers us what Helga cannot: a critique of gendered relations in a religious

small town. But to a large extent, this critique takes place at the expense of Helga who, as the narrator later on claims, “did not reason about this feeling, as she did not at that time reason about anything” (112).

The narrator justifies such distance by hinting that the reason why Helga is unable to speak for herself is due to her subjugated position as a mother and a housewife; she is simply too tired from all the work and physical labor to even think. The everyday tasks both keep Helga happily busy *and* unable to devote time to realizing her oppression:

And she could go happily, inexpertly, about the humble tasks of her household, cooking, dishwashing, sweeping, dusting, mending, and darning. (112)

She was too busy. Every minute of the day was full. Necessarily. And to Helga this was a new experience. She was charmed by it. To be mistress in one’s own house, to have a garden, and chickens, and a pig; to have a husband—and to be “right with God”—what pleasure did that other world which she had left contain that could surpass these? (111)

Once Helga is forced to stay in bed for days in a state of delirium after the birth of her fourth child, she finally has “too much time to think” (123), resulting in Helga regaining her senses and beginning to critically view her family’s situation, the lack of female solidarity, and the oppressive use of religion in the rural town. And in these final pages of the novel, the narrator loosens its ironic grip, comes closer to Helga’s thoughts and allows her, in a way, to speak for herself again.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ An example of how the narrator lets Helga speak again is through her newly discovered critique of religion. The narration moves once again into free indirect discourse, but this time without an ironic distance – perhaps because Helga is now able to realize what the narrator tried to say all along: “God! Bah! . . .The white man’s God. And His great love for all people regardless of race!

The ending of *Quicksand* has been much read as a feminist commentary – as a critique of patriarchal institutions from the family to the church, of compulsory heteronormativity, and of the repression of black women’s sexuality by both racist ideology and racial uplift ideology (e.g. Carby; Hutchinson “Subject to Disappearance”¹⁹⁰; Scheper 681-82; Wagner). Helga’s tragic ending has been analyzed as a commentary on black women’s position in heterosexual and patriarchal families; in the words of McDowell, “*Quicksand* likens marriage to death for women” and dismantles “the myth that marriage elevates women in the social scale” (xxi).

While I agree with these feminist critiques, I do wonder if the narrator’s strategy in delivering such commentary deserves closer scrutiny. On the one hand, the narrator’s ironic and distancing move could be read as a part of the critique itself; it is a way of showing how a woman in Helga’s position can be physically and mentally so burned to the ground that they are unable to articulate their own oppressed position. In other words, the narrator’s didacticism is acceptable because it allows the narrator to use Helga’s position as a way to produce a feminist critique. On the other hand, the ironic distance of the final chapters could – and perhaps should – be read as the outcome or highpoint of implicit patronizing the narrator has showcased towards Helga previously in the novel.

Namely, starting from the first chapters in Naxos, the narrator chooses to refer to Helga as a “girl” in significant moments of the text. The first case takes place already on the opening pages, as the narrator describes Helga in a detailed and even fetishized manner to the reader – describing her “sensitive and sensuous lips” and “attractive”

What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe. How could she, how could anyone, have been so deluded? How could ten million black folk credit it when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction?” (121).

features, drawing attention to details on Helga's body that "the observer's attention would fasten" to (1-2).⁸⁹ Later on, Helga is named as a "girl" to juxtapose her to more mature "women" around her (37), as well as to undermine her narrative construction of herself as "Helga Crane." Right before experiencing her religious conversion, as Helga is wandering the streets of New York and pondering the option of death, we first see her dismiss the thought because "it would reduce her, Helga Crane, to unimportance, to nothingness. Even in her unhappy present state, that did not appeal to her" (101). Here we have the dignified "Helga Crane" in control of how she wants to be perceived, whereas moments later the narrator paints us a different image of a soaked and soiled "girl": "Death had lost all of its picturesque aspects to the girl lying soaked and soiled in the flooded gutter" (102).

In moments of loss or deep emotional investment, the composed "Helga Crane" is juxtaposed, perhaps even in a light manner of ridicule, to the narrator's "girl" version of Helga. We see the same pattern repeat after the frenzy of Helga's conversion, as she finally gets a moment of clarity and decides – as she does in the end of many of the novel's chapters – that *this* will be the beginning of a new and happier life for her:

The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand and to become very easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme

⁸⁹ This opening scene has received much scholarly analysis, but typically the narrator's acts are not questioned. Ann E. Hostetler comments how the narrator presents Helga as "a physical object" and an "aesthetically self-conscious surface, carefully crafted and controlled" (37). Pamela Barnett reads this objectification positively as a feminist critique: "By focusing on the elaborate by which Helga, a black woman character, becomes an object of art, Larsen critiques a tradition of representation that purports to be mimetic but actually reproduces stereotypes of the black female" (577). Others have noted how Larsen creates an ambivalent "spectatorial situation that edges towards voyeurism" (Dittmar 146).

aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known. (106)

But while “Helga Crane” feels supreme aspiration, the narrator describes her in a more ambivalent manner as a girl who in that moment becomes “lost – or saved” (105).

The conversion scene is the final time that Helga is referred to as a “girl,” possibly because her subsequent childbearing in Alabama elevates her to the status of a woman in the narrator’s vocabulary. But instead of patronizingly “girling” Helga, the narrator chooses deep narrative distance in the final chapters. The development of this narrative strategy leads me to suggest that at the crux of the narration of *Quicksand* is a juxtaposition of the narrator’s Helga as a “girl” and Helga’s own “Helga Crane,” and a battle over narrative agency and voice.

Claudia Tate has noted how *Quicksand*’s narrator at the very end of the novel “suspends the shared perspective [between Helga and narrator] and discontinues the sympathetic rendering of Helga’s consciousness” (235). This change in narrative outlook furthermore “prompts the reader to question whether Helga’s death fulfills her own demand or executes the narrator’s desire” (235). Tate follows these observations with a psychoanalytic and biographical reading of *Quicksand* in order to argue that it is ultimately the narrator who demands Helga’s death in the final chapter (257). Though I disagree with the theoretical premises of Tate’s reading, as well as with its conclusion, I do empathize with her critical stance towards the narrator’s role in the novel. Many scholars seem to take for granted the classical hierarchy of voices, where a heterodiegetic

narrator is seen as a more objective and reliable source of knowledge than a character.⁹⁰ But why should we trust the narrator's version of Helga more so than her own?

To conclude, I want to argue (again) that Helga's attempt to construct her own "Helga Crane" is precisely an attempt to have some narrative agency in her own life, particularly against the narratives and frames others place on her. Therefore, it is worth asking if and why we do not question the narrator for deciding when Helga is to be trusted, or for patronizingly framing her as a clueless "girl." In the first and final rural chapters, the novel asks the reader to do to Helga what other characters in the storyworld have done too; to look at her from afar, to objectify her, and to decide what is best for her. A resisting reader should not only acknowledge the feminist critiques that the novel pushes forth by employing a rural small town setting and its patriarchal institutions, but also acknowledge the way in which the novel's narrator can – perhaps too easily – persuade us to look at someone like Helga from a superior position.

These narrative details are significant for our understanding of the text's politics, because they also illuminate how the two peripheries of the novel – the Nordic and the rural – become connected. The heaviness of *Quicksand's* ending stems from the many ways rural America is juxtaposed to Helga's transatlantic travel and Nordic life. In addition to this formal juxtaposition, where Helga's self-authorizing sections in Denmark are contrasted with the narrator's authorial moves in rural Alabama, the two locations are also tied thematically and intertextually. It is these connections that I want to discuss in the remainder of this chapter. Though scholars have typically analyzed the themes of

⁹⁰ These types of biases or dismissals of figurative voices can be found in narratological theories, too. For example, Emma Kafalenos notes in her discussion of different types of "knowing" in fiction how important it is for readers to make a distinction between what is "*fact* (because a performative narrator tells us) and what is *merely* a character's *opinion*" (256; emphasis added).

rural Alabama in *Quicksand* within a purely American cultural-national setting, the region's politics remain in discussion with the other significant part of Helga's world – Scandinavia.

First, let us look at the thematic connections between the two regions. Instead of Denmark and Alabama being worlds apart from another, the Copenhagen chapters of Helga's life in fact thematically foreshadow her rural ending in Alabama. It is her stay in Denmark that first sparks Helga to seriously consider the idea of having children:

Helga Crane didn't, however, think often of America, except in unfavorable contrast to Denmark. For she had resolved never to return to the existence of ignominy which the New World of opportunity and promise forced upon Negroes. How stupid she had been ever to have thought that she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color! She saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage. More black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch. (68-69)

By comparing her time in Denmark to the experience of being a woman of color in the U.S., Helga realizes, for the first time, that she does not want a future that includes giving birth to children that would be subjected to the life of a person of color in the U.S. While living in Denmark, Helga adopts a disgust towards the idea of reproductively forwarding her race – a topic she has to face head-on when she returns to visit Harlem and encounters her former Naxos fiancé, James Vayle. When catching up with James at a Harlem party, Helga reiterates her previous, private thought on childbearing: “Why add

any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? Why do Negroes have children? Surely it must be sinful” (96). To this idea, James replies, “aghast”:

But, Helga! Good heavens! Don’t you see that if we—I mean people like us—don’t have children, the others will still have? That’s one of the things that’s the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones: lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We’re the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere. (96)

Perhaps unknowingly, James articulates how black women’s sexuality became a significant tool for the racial uplift discourse, particularly in bourgeois circles. His response to Helga showcases extreme classism as well as a demand for black women to limit their sexuality according to the color line *and* the class lines within that color line. Helga’s thoughts in Denmark become an ominous foreshadowing to the final American chapters, as Helga’s temporary visit to Harlem turns into the rest of her life in the rural South. She is unable to leave the U.S. again, as she is unable to avoid the very future she never wanted for herself. The novel ends with Helga trapped in a cycle of pregnancy and birthing:

And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child. (125)

The ending implies that Helga will continue laboring and childbearing until she dies – perhaps already during the pregnancy of her fifth child. What adds to the painful

ending of the novel is the fact that the narrator allows – finally, after the chapters in Copenhagen – for descriptions of Leib to take over. Whereas the mere memory of the U.S. caused Helga to feel “disturbing nausea” and a “tangible thing in her throat” (76) while she was still living in relative freedom in Denmark, those memories and sensations turn into her everyday life in rural Alabama. In the countryside, Helga feels “extraordinarily and annoyingly ill,” having “horrible nausea and hateful faintness” (113-14). Due to her physical labor, Helga’s own focus shifts for the first time in her life from her Körper to her Leib; Helga, “who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it” (113). Despite her love and pride over the three children “all born within the short space of twenty months,” the narration comments on how “[t]he children used her up” (114). By committing herself to creating a new biological family, Helga finds her end. The nonstop process of reproduction destroys her body, warning in a queer manner against the biological heteronormative family unit – particularly when it functions as the basis of racial and class unity at the expense of the laboring women.⁹¹

Interestingly, the concept of the biological family is at issue in all three of my modernist case studies. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea chooses to abandon her biological family in *Moonstone* – claiming that her family members never really were related to her anyway. As we will see in the following chapter, Myyriäinen, the protagonist in Hagar Olsson’s *Träsnidaren och döden* (*Woodcarver and Death*), chooses a similar path as he

⁹¹ These themes reverberate in Anatole France’s “The Procurator of Judaea” (1892), which is the final text that Helga wants to read while she is recovering from the birth of her fourth child. Hutchinson explains how France’s short story articulates “the relationship between racial ideology, empire, patriarchy, and the control of sexuality for procreative purposes, the reproduction of race and the imperial state” (“Subject to Disappearance” 188; “*Quicksand* and the Racial” 564).

leaves behind his biological family and replaces it with a queer community in rural Karelia. In both Cather's and Olsson's texts, the biological family unit is critiqued, and the novels envision a new kind of utopia where the characters make alternative forms of kin. In contrast to the utopianism in Cather and Olsson, Larsen's *Quicksand* opts for a much more pessimistic ending, where Helga is forced to choose the biological family that ultimately destroys her. Unlike for Thea and for Myyriäinen, there is no escape or an alternative community available for a biracial character like Helga.

In addition to the way Denmark molds Helga's thoughts about life in the U.S. and thematically foreshadows her end in small town Alabama, there is also a Nordic intertextual echo in Helga's character at the rural ending of the novel. A few scholars have previously noted intertextual resemblances between Larsen's *Quicksand* and authors of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough. George Hutchinson, for example, argues that the ending of *Quicksand* ties Larsen with the naturalist Henrik Ibsen, rather than with the classical dramatists, since in both Larsen's and Ibsen's texts "fate is not above and independent of human institutions but largely determined by them" ("Subject to Disappearance" 190). For Helga, it is the institutions of race and sex in America that determine many of her possibilities in life. Additionally, Lunde and Stenport have noted similarities between the personalities and destinies of *Quicksand's* Helga and Ibsen's Hedda Gabler in his 1890 play *Hedda Gabler*:

Both the eponymous Hedda and Helga share irrational and self-destructive impulses . . . Both narratives feature rebellious yet conformist female protagonists – torn by intense social pressures to marry, competing male suitors, and unwanted pregnancies – who are finally destroyed in

“suicidal” endings. And with both, much remains unvoiced and unsaid. Hedda, like Helga, remains a complex and conflicted riddle, even to herself. (240)⁹²

I would like to expand on these intertextual allusions and suggest additional points of reference between Larsen’s writing and Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* in order to conclude my discussion on the rural-Nordic connections and geographical politics of *Quicksand*. Larsen’s and Ibsen’s texts showcase similarities that move beyond Helga and Hedda’s characters to larger issues concerning marriage, reproduction, suicide, and freedom, consequently affecting the way *Quicksand*’s ending should be interpreted.

Starting with Helga and Hedda, what I find striking in these two female protagonists is not so much the “self-destructive impulse” Lunde and Stenport describe, but rather a desire to wound others. Such desires are repeatedly commented on in *Quicksand*:

Nevertheless she was soothed by the impetuous discharge of violence, and a sigh of relief came from her. (5)

In the girl blazed a desire to wound. (18)

She felt a sharp stinging sensation and a recurrence of that anger and defiant desire to hurt which had so seared her on that past morning in Naxos. . . . Again abruptly had come the uncontrollable wish to wound. (47)

Similarly, Hedda burningly desires to “ha’ magt over en menneskeskæbne” (Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* 145),⁹³ which for her signifies wounding others both emotionally

⁹² Additionally, Lunde and Stenport suggest that Larsen possibly evokes the teachings of Ellen Key, a Swedish turn-of-the-century feminist, in the final Alabama chapters (240).

and physically. For both protagonists, these affects are most strongly elicited by encounters with their former love interests, and thus the desire to wound becomes connected to questions of family, marriage, and reproduction.

Helga's most intense fits take place when she encounters or thinks of her former colleague, Dr. Robert Anderson, while Hedda reveals how she had always wanted to destroy and hurt Ejlert Løvborg, the man she was interested in prior to marrying her current husband. As noted above, Helga remains appalled by the idea of birthing for the majority of the novel, and a similar insistence takes place in *Hedda Gabler*, as Hedda continuously evades and dismisses her mother-in-law's and husband's suggestions about her pregnancy. Pregnancy and birthing become taboos in the play that the characters circle around but never explicitly confront. Rather than give birth and maintain life, both Hedda and Helga share a desire to wound the men that may have led them to such a fate. Moreover, questions of pregnancy are tied with class purity in *Hedda Gabler* – like they are in *Quicksand* to both class and race (see also Moi 316-17). Hedda cannot stand to witness Løvborg potentially begin a relationship with a former maid, Thea Elvsted, who has risen in her class status due to a previous marriage. When Elvsted helps Løvborg write the notes for his scholarly book that the two name their “barn” (186, child), implying the future possibility of biological children, Hedda secretly burns the book while repeating “Nu brænder,— nu brænder jeg barnet” (193).⁹⁴ These actions function as the climax of the play and drive Løvborg towards madness and suicide.

⁹³ Hedda desires to “mould a human destiny” (81-82). When providing longer English quotations from Ibsen's play, I refer to Edmund Gosse and William Archer's translation *Hedda Gabler*.

⁹⁴ “I am burning—I am burning your child” (106-7).

Helga's death in the countryside points out a final connection between Larsen and Ibsen. For both Helga and Hedda, the inability to have control over social institutions and pressures leads the protagonists to a sort of suicide – more implicitly for Helga, but literally for Hedda, who shoots herself in the end of the play. Though there have been discussions of the suicide motif in Larsen scholarship, particularly as it connects to ideas of freedom (see Doyle), to my knowledge no one has yet noted how this coupling of suicide and freedom echoes Ibsen's work. *Quicksand's* ending seems to suggest that the only way out for Helga – and thus the only way to attain some sort of freedom – is through death. Such a coupling of freedom through suicide or death takes place in *Hedda Gabler*, too; Hedda repeatedly expresses that the way to achieve beauty and freedom is through destruction and suicide, even encouraging Løvborg to kill himself as an act of courage and beauty (Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler* 192-93, 215-16, 220). This desire is only partly fulfilled for Hedda through Løvborg's death, since it remains ambiguous whether he pulled the trigger himself or not. In the end, Hedda attempts to escape her own state of being “ufri” (232, unfree) and regain her freedom by taking her own life (236).⁹⁵

Even beyond *Quicksand*, the motif of suicide is repeated throughout Larsen's short oeuvre. In addition to Helga's social death or suicide, Larsen explores the topic most explicitly in her short story “Freedom” (1926) and her second novel *Passing*. The male protagonist in “Freedom” is tormented by the thought of a former mistress he abandoned in search of his own freedom. After finding out that his lover died in childbirth right after he had left her, the protagonist becomes angry and delusional,

⁹⁵ In addition to *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen's most famous protagonist, Nora Helmer of *Et dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*), also contemplates suicide. Though Nora's motif is to free herself from financial pressures and consequently save her husband's and family's reputation, the motif is similarly connected to questions of freedom, marriage, and family, as it is in *Hedda Gabler* and *Quicksand*.

accusing the mistress of escaping him and attaining the freedom he so longed for. Ultimately, these thoughts lead the protagonist to commit suicide by stepping out of a window. The story – already through its title – stresses again the connection between suicide, unsuccessful heterosexual relationships, and freedom in Larsen’s (and Ibsen’s) writing. A similar death happens in the infamously ambiguous ending of *Passing*, where Clare Kendry dies by falling down from a window – by her own fault, her husband’s, or her friend Irene’s, the novel never reveals. Ejlert Løvborg’s ambiguous death becomes a similar crux for the narrative of *Hedda Gabler*; with no reliable eyewitness accounts, the central characters remain puzzled whether Løvborg committed the act himself (with a pistol Hedda provided him in the hopes of his suicide), or whether the trigger was pulled by a third party. Though *Passing* and *Hedda Gabler* remain ambiguous about the cause of Clare Kendry’s and Ejlert Løvborg’s deaths, both characters were at least metaphorically pushed to such an end by the people around them who fiercely attempted to maintain various social lines – whether racial or classist.

In neither Larsen’s nor Ibsen’s text is suicide glorified or the pursuit of freedom through death idealized. Rather, the end in death in a novel like *Quicksand* highlights what happens when oppressing institutions and social lines are maintained even at the expense of human lives. Typically, Helga’s death has been analyzed along racial lines; in Hutchinson’s words, “*Quicksand* marks the threshold where she, whose being forms the radical ‘other’ to the racial symbolic, disappears—or rather, is perpetually sacrificed on the altar of the color line” (“Subject to Disappearance” 190). Similarly, Rafael Walker has argued that “Helga’s biracial heritage coupled with her principled refusal to deny either part of it condemns her to a no-woman’s-land—the uninhabitable racial space of

‘neither-nor,’ of nonexistence” (176). By analyzing the socially constructed nature of race, Larsen illuminates how fundamentally race structures modern society and experience, particularly along gendered and class lines (Hutchinson, *In Search of* 239; Walker 177).

However, Helga’s racial liminality – as already indicated in Walker’s word choice of “no-woman’s-land” – is deeply tied to geographical liminality, as well. Helga attempts to synthesize both racial and geographical aspects of her life, hoping for a “shuttle-like” (90) existence but, in the end, is forced to choose a singular racial community and a singular location through the small town in rural Alabama. The Danish and rural sections become entwined formally, thematically, and intertextually in order to emphasize how Helga’s wish to exist in more complex racial and geographical spaces is denied from her. In the end, Helga escapes the rigidity of the color line and the entrapment to a singular location via the same path that her Nordic intertextual sister chooses: death. But Helga’s death, like that of Hedda’s, leaves the reader longing for a different outcome and a different society.

Rural regions are central to *Quicksand*: they are used to frame and forward the novel’s feminist critique of the position women (and particularly women of color) have in traditional and patriarchal institutions. But this critique, especially in the Alabaman ending, becomes powerful through its juxtaposition to the previous Nordic section. The Danish chapters provide Helga with more freedom and self-authority as she creates her own narrative of a happier “Helga Crane” – and this is later contrasted to her time in the U.S. both formally, as the narrator takes away Helga’s voice in leading the narrative, as well as thematically, once Helga loses agency over her body and reproductive decisions.

The thought of liberation tied to the Nordic region, however, continues to haunt the rural chapters via intertextual allusions to other female protagonists struggling for freedom in the midst of modernity.

In addition to showing how the connections between the rural and Nordic sections of *Quicksand* contribute to its feminist and modernist critiques, what I have hoped to illuminate is that even though *Quicksand* is the only one of Larsen's texts where the Nordic region is part of the novel's setting and thus plays an important geographical role, Larsen's other writings also show intertextual connections to the Nordic countries. Though Lunde and Stenport have begun to point out the various connections Larsen has to the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, and particularly to the writings of J. P. Jacobsen, a lot of work remains to be done. Here I have highlighted one such additional connection in order to shine a new light on Larsen's much-discussed feminism. It is significant that in order to analyze and discuss the workings of gender, race, and class lines in early twentieth-century America, Larsen seems to have turned to Denmark and Ibsen as an important source of artistic influence.

Finally, I want to conclude this chapter and my discussion of *Quicksand* by highlighting how Larsen's take on regionalism and the countryside differs from what I analyzed in the previous chapter with regards to Cather's writing. To an extent, Cather's Thea in *The Song of the Lark* is a yoyoing figure much like Helga; never fully satisfied anywhere, migrating both between urban and rural America as well as crossing the Atlantic to Europe, longing for the cultural healing of the rural while judging its bigoted, racist, or conformist sensibilities. And yet, for Thea the transnational travel leads to (if nothing else, at least capitalist) success; she ultimately finds her place in the world of

opera, and forever cherishes her rural memories as a source of cultural inspiration. Such options and outcomes are not present in Larsen's *Quicksand*.

In *The African American Roots of Modernism*, James Smethurst considers the role of regional migration and urbanization in African American modernist literature by asking:

What happened when black became a place, not perhaps yet a country, as Amiri Baraka coined it, and no longer a cluster of cabins on the edge of the plantation, but an urban neighborhood, a seeming city that one could reach by foot, private car, taxi, subway, train, or streetcar? (96)

Through Larsen's *Quicksand*, one might follow Smethurst's question with another one: what happened when, despite the Black Renaissance, freer mobility, urbanization, and (voluntary) transatlantic travel, there still wasn't a place for a biracial woman? Larsen's novel resists any conceptualization of being able to have a native soil, roots in a particular region, or a home and cultural belonging in a certain place – the basic elements of local color and even some regional literature. Out of my case studies it is the most critical towards *any* region; there is no utopian possibility anywhere Helga travels, not in the modern Copenhagen, Harlem, Chicago, or the rural South where she settles into. Thus, the novel seems to go against the idea of positive or affirmative regionalism, where rural areas are seen as possible locations for transnational belonging that may even transcend intersectional differences, as in the cases of Willa Cather and, as I will show in the following chapter, Hagar Olsson. But perhaps *Quicksand* is therefore the one of my case studies that most fits the idea of critical regionalism, where region emerges as a location for political critique. In each of the places Helga travels to, a different form of

oppression awaits her, and the intersecting structures of racialization and gendering are painfully detailed to the reader along the way. *Quicksand* seems to argue that the rural cannot become radical or utopian unless the institutions that mold it in oppressing ways are broken down. If they are not, characters like Helga, whose existence defies such institutions as the color line, will not find their freedom.

CHAPTER IV
(POST)NATIONAL UTOPIAS:
THE FINLAND-SWEDISH MINORITY AND THE LOST KARELIAN
COUNTRYSIDE

4.1. DROWNING IN A SEA OF SPATIAL EXPANSIONS

[M]uch modernism research in the Western academy and in the museum is still bound by the local. Despite the celebrated internationalism of the modern, we still experience obstacles in the very structures of academic disciplines, their compartmentalization in university departments of national literatures, and their inherent unequal power relations in acknowledging what I call *modernism at large*, namely, the crossnational cultural forms that emerge from the negotiation of the modern with the indigenous, the colonial, and the postcolonial in the “non-Western” world. (Huyssen, “Geographies of Modernism” 194)

The term modernism breaks open, into something we call *geomodernisms*, which signals a locational approach to modernisms’ engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity. . . . Thus in some sense, however local their settings, their horizon is global and their voicing is refracted through the local-global dialectic of inside and outside, belonging and exile, in ways that disrupt conventional poetics. (Doyle and Winkiel 3)

To realize how prominent the spatial expansion of modernist literary and cultural studies has become within the past decade or so, one need only look at the myriad of competing terms that have recently sprung up to describe the global and transnational nature of modernism. From “geomodernism” (Doyle and Winkiel) and “modernism at large” (Huysen; see also Appadurai) to “transnational modernism” (*Modernism/Modernity* 13.3; Friedman, “Cultural Parataxis”), “planetary modernism” (Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*), and all types of global, peripheral, and minor modernisms, scholars are attempting to coin a definition that best covers all the geographical and temporal locations of a phenomenon whose international nature has been understood since its very beginning. What seems to unite these new spatial explorations is an attempt to move the scholarly focus to the non-Western world and to look at the locations and travels of modernisms without creating fixed Eurocentric hierarchies of “primary and secondary” or “early and late” movements. As Susan Stanford Friedman states, “[s]uch a geography of modernism requires the recognition of heterogeneous and multiple sites around the globe that produce their own modernities and modernisms at different points in time, each with its own hegemonies and internal divisions and each placed in some sort of changing but hierarchical relation to others” (“Cultural Parataxis” 36).

This theoretical ambition to de-center supposed origins and canons of modernism, to give voice to the othered, to focus on the (de)colonized, and to move from the national to the transnational is both admirable and necessary, and seems to be central to all the new spatial expansions – despite their differing names. Like Andreas Huysen’s “modernism at large” (which in turn draws from Arjun Appadurai’s “modernity at large”), Friedman’s “planetary modernisms” call to question the West as the center and

origin of cultural production, and like Laura Winkiel and Laura Doyle's groundbreaking *Geomodernisms* from 2005, later terms seem to reiterate the need to promote an approach that is both local and transnational at once.⁹⁶ To some extent, the issues these theories attempt to tackle are particular to national literature departments, and many of them are explicitly drawing from the long tradition of Comparative Literature to resist academic compartmentalization along national (and Western-centric) lines. Indeed, to a comparatist, these interventions may rather seem like re-inventions, since the field of Comparative Literature was founded on a study of literatures that always crosses national and linguistic borders while remembering the specific historical-cultural contexts of each of the locations under scrutiny.

This chapter begins by asking what happens to the modernisms that remain forgotten even in the current global theoretical framework. As Pericles Lewis notes, despite the broadening of the field, recent studies still emphasize literature written in English, while even "major interventions in 'transnational' modernism tend to focus almost exclusively on the literature of the former British Empire" (1). If "global" implicitly turns into "global Anglophone" and the West is lumped into a single unity, what happens to the peripheries within Europe and to countries such as Finland that do not neatly fit into the colonizer-colonized model? To answer such questions, this final chapter will move from rural American case studies to Finnish ones and, by doing so,

⁹⁶ It is worth noting that Friedman's planetary approach is perhaps one of the most ambitious and controversial expansions of modernism, at least along temporal lines. In order to battle the Eurocentric fixation on modernism, she "provocatively asks for an even more radical epistemological shift, one that can incorporate the geohistories and cultures of the planet *before* 1500, the conventional benchmark for the emergent rise of Western modernity" (*Planetary Modernisms* x). Amidst these spatial and temporal expansions, some scholars have justifiably wondered how far the term "modernism" can be stretched before it turns into a useless category or into a synonym for "modern" (see Wollaeger 11). For an excellent take on the developments and state of modernist studies, see Paul K. Saint-Amour's "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism."

propose that a regional lens can help the peculiarly peripheral locations of the world to be read side by side with the dominating ones.⁹⁷

Although Northern Europe has been a part of the transnational movements analyzed throughout my project – from Nella Larsen’s heroine’s Danish travels and Nordic intertextualities to Willa Cather’s depictions of Nordic-American immigrants – this final chapter will fully transit to the modernisms published within the Nordic countries. My focus will be on Finland’s largest minority, the Swedish speaking Finland-Swedes, and Finnish modernism’s connections to Karelia, the largely rural area bordering Finland and the Soviet Union at the time.⁹⁸ Up until the First World War, Karelia functioned as a significant meeting place for artists of multiple nationalities and

⁹⁷ As discussed in the previous chapters, although regional modernism has gained some renewed interest as part of the spatial expansion of modernist studies, the countryside remains a largely unexplored topic within modernism. For example, Huyssen, who calls for an expansion of the locations of modernism with his “modernism at large,” re-canonizes the idea of modernism as an inherently urban phenomenon by framing his spatial expansion along urban lines: “The geography of classical modernism is primarily determined by metropolitan cities and the cultural experiments and upheavals they generated: Baudelaire’s Paris; Dostoyevsky’s or Mandelstam’s Saint Petersburg . . . Dos Passos’s Manhattan. This is the standard continental European list with its few Anglo outposts, but it ignores the modernism of Shanghai or São Paulo in the 1920s, Borges’s Buenos Aires, the Caribbean of Aimé Césaire, the Mexico City of Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Alfaro Siqueiros. These additions remind us that metropolitan culture was translated, appropriated, and creatively mimicked in colonized and postcolonial countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America” (189).

⁹⁸ Because Finland was a part of the Swedish Kingdom for about 700 years, the country has had a Swedish-speaking minority group for centuries. This group, which became known as “Finland-Swedes” in the early twentieth century, continues to be Finland’s largest minority and is mostly scattered along the coastal line of the Baltic Sea in southwestern Finland. Finland-Swedes played a transformative role in the birth of modernism in Finland, and I will detail their political and cultural history as well as their relation to modernism in the following sections.

Karelia refers to the vast, mainly rural region between Finland and Russia. Parts of the Finnish Karelia were lost to the Soviet Union during the Winter War (1939-1940) and the Continuation War (1941-1944) that took place amidst the Second World War between Finland and the Soviet Union. Among these was the area known as the Karelian Isthmus, which includes the city of Vyborg. Karelia, and particularly the Karelian Isthmus, was both a childhood home and a popular resort area for many Finland-Swedish modernists – including Hagar Olsson – who gathered there for leisure time and artistic inspiration during the first decades of the twentieth century. For discussions of Nordic modernist artists’ relations to Karelia, see Erik Ekelund, Roger Holmström (*Hagar Olsson*), and Natalia Baschmakoff.

languages. This included central figures in the Finland-Swedish group of modernist authors and critics, such as Hagar Olsson, Edith Södergran, and Elmer Diktonius, who are regarded as the first modernists not only in Finland but in the entire Nordic/Scandinavian region (Holmström, “Innerlighetens färdvägar” 87; Baschmakoff). Not only was Karelia a hub of transnational exchanges and influences, but the Karelian landscape featured as a prominent milieu in many modernist texts written at the time. Therefore, looking closely at this geographical region will illustrate one of the central arguments of my project; namely, that rural areas have functioned as cosmopolitan and critical sites in the midst of modernity and in modernist representations.

Conventional accounts of the relations between Finnish and American modernisms often trace the material connections and influences between modernists, for example by listing Finnish translations or book reviews of internationally famous modernist works or by detailing the foreign texts that modernist authors in Finland were reading during their own writing time. Hagar Olsson wrote an article where she embraced the modern poetry of Walt Whitman, Elmer Diktonius was the first to translate Ezra Pound’s poems into Swedish, Edith Södergran was heavily influenced by Nietzsche, and the post-Second World War modernists were affected by the first Finnish translations of authors such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and T. S. Eliot. This framing easily promotes the conventional narrative of modernism moving largely one-way from centers to peripheries; the idea that translations of authors such as Joyce or Eliot “introduced” modernism to Finland – and since these translations came relatively late to Finland and the Nordic countries, so did modernism itself (see, for example, Riikonen, “Modernism in Finnish Literature; Eysteinnsson, “Introduction”).

As I explained in the introductory chapter, this project takes as its foundation the idea that the comparative study of minor literatures should not depend on their (im)possible material connections to dominant world literatures. Thus, instead of focusing on such material connections, I establish the link between American and Finnish modernisms primarily by using the lens of regionalism to analyze American and Finnish texts side by side. I argue that regionalism provides its own transnational frame of analysis, particularly since the phenomenon of modernity affected the countryside all over the world with authors from various locations responding to similar developments and crisis. Comparing rural texts in various locations allows us to find new manifestations of modernism; for example, the transnational way in which female authors in both Finland and the U.S. chose the countryside as a milieu for critiquing the unequal development of modernity and bringing forth suppressed, marginal, and minority voices.

I begin this final chapter in section 4.2. by looking at accounts (and omissions) of the Nordic countries and particularly Finland in recent handbooks and scholarly collections of European and global modernisms in order to get a sense of how Nordic modernism is currently understood within transnational scholarship. After reviewing the typical ideas and (mis)conceptions about Nordic modernisms, I will move on to analyze Finnish modernism's relations to the countryside in section 4.3., with a particular focus on Karelia as a rural yet cosmopolitan borderland for the modernist imagination. The main case study of this chapter is the author, playwright, essayist, and cultural critic Hagar Olsson – who was dubbed the “high priestess of modernism” by her contemporaries (Riikonen 848) – and particularly her 1940 novel *Träsnidaren och döden*:

Berättelse från Karelen (Woodcarver and Death).⁹⁹ The narratological focus of this chapter is the curious we-narrator of Olsson's novel, who not only complicates the text's themes of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and the countryside, but also produces a peculiar collective agency for the people of a rural small town in Karelia.

The final two sections of this chapter (4.4. and 4.5.) bring together my project's arguments regarding the role of the countryside in modernist studies. In section 4.4., I will make a case for the transnational potential of regionalism by broadening my analysis from Hagar Olsson's novel to a comparative look at multiple rural texts from Swedish, Finnish, Finland-Swedish, and American modernisms. My hope is to both highlight the plurality and centrality of rural representations in Nordic modernisms from the 1920s to the 1960s and to contrast their handling of intersectional and political issues with those that took place simultaneously in American regional modernisms. The final section of this chapter (4.5.) concludes my arguments regarding the relations between rural, national, and transnational tensions in my regional modernist case studies.

4.2. HISTORIES OF NORDIC MODERNISMS: PERIPHERAL AND LATE?

From the point of view of literary scholarship practiced in the Nordic countries, the claim that Finnish modernism is somehow forgotten can seem ignorant and unjustified. Finnish and Nordic modernist studies are alive and well, and increasingly participate in the transnational turn of the field. Recent edited collections not only highlight the modernist

⁹⁹ When providing English quotations from Olsson's novel, I will use George C. Schoolfield's 1965 translation *Woodcarver and Death*. A literal translation of the Swedish title would read *Woodcarver and Death: Stories from Karelia*. Quotations in the original Swedish will be marked as *Träsnidaren och döden* in parenthesis, while English translations will be referred to with *Woodcarver and Death*.

connections between the various Nordic countries, but within the larger framework of Europe, as well.¹⁰⁰ However, once we turn from European to even more global accounts, the Nordic region becomes less visible. It is not a part of the geographies of geomodern or planetary theories, and in global collections and handbooks the Nordic region tends to receive marginal representation typically focusing on Scandinavia – and thus omitting Finland from the conversation.¹⁰¹ There are, of course, a myriad of understandable reasons for such omissions, from the desire for a non-Western focus to practical academic phenomena such as language barriers and academic departmentalization.

The point of this section is not to lament the disappearance of specific regions but rather to add to the already existing scholarship that attempts to make transnational connections and marginal locations more visible. In order to do so, I will first contextualize Nordic modernisms precisely to a global audience, and then present regionalism as one possible framework that makes Finnish modernism more accessible from a global and comparative perspective. I will begin the former of these tasks by asking what Nordic modernisms currently look like to someone who can only access them through English-language accounts. More specifically, I will briefly analyze four scholarly works that do – at least to some extent – include the Nordic region into their

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, *English and Nordic Modernisms* (2002), *European and Nordic Modernisms* (2004), and *A Cultural History of the Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925* (2012).

¹⁰¹ While “Scandinavia” refers to the shared linguistic and cultural heritage of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, only the geographically determined terms “Northern Europe” and “Nordic” include Finland and Iceland, as well. For example, the only article in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012) regarding Northern Europe is one focused on Scandinavia, i.e. Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian modernisms. In academic departments at American universities, the difference between Scandinavian and Nordic is often blurred, since Finnish and Icelandic studies are placed into Scandinavian departments for practical reasons.

discussions of transnational modernisms.¹⁰² In these accounts, the highly contested terms of “periphery” and “belated” come to play a central role.

The idea that different regions of the world can be divided into cores and peripheries, and that the relations between the two are “seen as the decisive determinant of the pattern of modern history” is based largely on Immanuel Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory from the 1970s (Craig 17). With the spatial expansion and rise of postcolonial studies within modernist scholarship, Wallerstein’s theory has become a starting point for many scholars debating the usefulness or potential harm of continuing to understand the world through a center-periphery dichotomy. While some scholars attempt to question and deconstruct the model (Bäckström et al., *Decentring the Avant-Garde*), many continue to support it as a useful means of highlighting ongoing power relations between different geographical regions (Thomsen, *Centring on the Peripheries*; Wollaeger 6-7).¹⁰³ Even Susan Stanford Friedman, whose premise lies on the questioning of the center-periphery dichotomy, hastens to note that one should not forget about the necessity of understanding unequal distributions of power in the formation of

¹⁰² Two of these are (or claim to be) global in their perspective: *Modernism* (2007) and *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (2012). The other two have a European focus: *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Vol. III: Europe 1880-1940* (2013) and *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* (2011). There are other edited collections that have single articles or chapters on individual authors of the Nordic region, such as *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent* (2009), with one article by Julia Tidigs devoted to the Finland-Swedish modernist Elmer Diktonius.

¹⁰³ In addition to enabling critiques of unequal power relations, Cairns Craig brings out how Wallerstein’s center-periphery model has allowed scholars to question the *cultural* and *moral* dominance of economic centers: “Wallerstein’s world systems theory provided a context for alternative ways of mapping the history of modern culture, centring on peripheries as places . . . [that] produced the real *cultural* innovations of the modern world, innovations which would later be adopted by the core” (19). Craig, furthermore, explicitly relates this to modernist scholarship: “Readings of modernism that located its origins at the periphery – whether in the Scandinavian countries or among the black community in North America or among Jews in Eastern Europe – were typical of this ‘cultural world reversed’” (19).

transnational modernity (“Cultural Parataxis” 36). Thus, the problem is not that some regions are peripheral in relation to others – particularly along economic and political lines. Rather, the issue is Eurocentric thinking, according to which specific European centers are also imagined as the *cultural* originators of movements such as modernism. Consequently, manifestations of modernisms in the economic and political peripheries are easily interpreted as derivative, belated, adapted, and secondary. For example, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* makes a case for the term “peripheral” over other options, such as “alternative” modernisms and modernities, precisely because the latter connote belatedness and alterity in relation to an original (Wollaeger 13).

When it comes to discussions of Nordic modernisms, the region is typically framed precisely through a center-periphery model, with the North classified as a peripheral or border case. For example, the grandiose two-volume *Modernism* titles its Nordic section as “Borders of Modernism in the Nordic World” (viii) while *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* goes so far as to divide its entire contents into two sections: “Core Modernisms” and “Peripheral Modernisms” (v-vi), with one chapter in the latter devoted to Scandinavian arts. In some of these accounts, peripheral also turns into belated: Astradur Eysteinnsson frames the entire Nordic section of *Modernism* in her introduction by arguing that the Nordic countries were at the “receiving end” in the international flow of modernist ideas and that the modernist breakthrough came late to the North, after the Second World War (834-35). This idea of belatedness and adaptation is further echoed both in the individual chapters of *Modernism*’s Nordic section, as well as in later works dealing with Nordic modernisms:

Finnish modernism *in stricto sensu* is situated in the 1950s and as such a very late phenomenon . . . Apart from the Tulenkantajat [Torchbearers] group, the activity of which can be regarded as a search for modernity, modernism in literature written in Finnish is — with some remarkable exceptions — a late phenomenon. (Riikonen 847)

Apart from August Strindberg's groundbreaking experiments for the stage in the early twentieth century, literary modernism came relatively late to Sweden compared to the rise of modernist movements in Central Europe and in Britain. To begin with, the new signals from abroad were made known via Swedish writers and artists travelling abroad, mainly to Paris. (Jansson, "Crossing Borders" 666)

It is quite fascinating how all of the arguments for the belatedness of Nordic modernisms have to begin by naming the exceptions — "apart from" — to the supposed rule. In addition to the exceptions listed by Riikonen and Jansson in relation to Finnish and Swedish modernisms, even Eysteinnsson in her introduction has to complicate the argument of lateness by mentioning a myriad of early examples of modernist writing, ranging from Finland-Swedes and the Tulenkantajat (Torchbearers) group in Finland to a number of other individual early modernists from the Nordic region (834).

Not all scholars share this idea of belatedness. For example, Leonardo Lisi in *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* makes a particularly strong case against it, claiming instead that "during the years of the modernist breakthrough, Europe was enjoying a Scandinavian craze" (192). Lisi draws a (male-centered) genealogy of early Scandinavian modernisms, starting from the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough of

Georg Brandes and Søren Kierkegaard, and continuing to modernist manifestations in the works of Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, J. P. Jacobsen, and Knut Hamsun.¹⁰⁴ Though Lisi's account focuses exclusively on Scandinavia and thus omits Finland, the early phenomenon of Finland-Swedish modernists in Finland has been picked up by other scholars, such as Anna Westerståhl Stenport and Mats Jansson:

The term literary modernism was being used in Swedish long before it became current in English to describe the remarkable but short-lived rise of a regional literary avant-garde based in Swedish-speaking Finland during and just after the First World War . . . At first largely isolated from other burgeoning Scandinavian modernist developments, the movement gained some of its urgency from Finland's secession from Russia in 1917, as well as from the social upheavals brought on by the Russian revolutions of that year. Poet Edith Södergran stands as the forerunner of this movement, formulating in 1918 one of the first poetic modernist manifestoes by a European woman writer (Stenport 487)

In the 1920s modernism in Swedish literature had its strongest hold and its most prominent representatives in the Swedish-speaking part of Finland. One can here discern a modernist movement for the first time in the Nordic countries. Edith Södergran, Elmer Diktonius, Gunnar Björling, and

¹⁰⁴ Lisi begins his argument by listing some of the famous international names that were influenced by these early Scandinavian modern and modernist thinkers, from Henry James and James Joyce to Eugene O'Neill and Walter Benjamin (191). His central claim is that – largely due to institutional reasons – scholarship after the Second World War has not considered these early Scandinavian writers representatives of modernism, but those of the generation that followed. Consequently, Scandinavian modernism has been defined as late and in terms of its resemblance to international models, a teleology that overlooks the fact that such models “depended in turn on their now largely ignored Scandinavian predecessors” (201).

Rabbe Enckell formed a modernist front from 1916, the year of Södergran's debut, until around 1930, when the group gradually dissolved. An important factor in the establishment of lyrical modernism at this time were the modernist magazines *Ultra* (1922) and *Quosego* (1928–9). (Jansson, "Crossing Borders" 673; see also Jansson, "Swedish Modernism" 838)

These lengthy quotations serve two purposes: firstly, they make apparent the peculiar status of the Swedish-speaking minority of Finland-Swedes, who by language belong to the Scandinavian group, yet by geographical location and nationality are Finnish and, consequently, part of the larger Nordic region. Thus, Finland is omitted in accounts of Scandinavian and Swedish modernisms – yet the Finland-Swedish modernists are often mentioned in passing as central figures (e.g. Stenport and Jansson above). Meanwhile, discussions of Finnish modernisms focus typically exclusively on Finnish-speaking modernists (e.g. Riikonen above), framing Finnish modernism as a late phenomenon in comparison to other Nordic countries. The Finland-Swedish modernists exist in a sort of scholarly in-between space, not clearly belonging to any of the individual Nordic countries' modernisms. Consequently, this group of writers both embodies the transnational nature of modernism as well as highlights the limits and problems of studying modernisms within the framework of singular nation-states.

Secondly, the above quotations also function as a brief introduction to and historical contextualization of the Finland-Swedish modernists, who serve as the focus of the remainder of this chapter. As both Stenport and Jansson argue, this minority group produced the first manifestations of modernism in the Nordic countries, often starting

with Edith Södergran's poetry, followed by the prose writing, poetry, plays, articles, and critiques written by Elmer Diktonius, Gunnar Björling, Rabbe Enckell, and – though not mentioned in either of the quotes – Hagar Olsson. They are also known for the two modernist little magazines produced in Finland at the time: the bilingual *Ultra* (1922) and the Swedish-language *Quosego* (1928-29). In the history of modernisms in Finland, the Finland-Swedes were followed by a Finnish language group called Tulenkantajat (Torchbearers) in the 1930s. Although not much contact existed between the Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking modernists (Riikonen 850), the leading figure of Tulenkantajat, Olavi Paavolainen, designed the cover to Hagar Olsson's 1929 novel *På Kanaanexpressen* (*On the Canaan Express*). He also dedicated *Nykyäikää etsimässä* (1930, *In search of the modern age*), the most significant Finnish-language essay collection on modernity and modernisms, to Hagar Olsson.

When discussing possible explanations for the early appearance of Finland-Swedish modernism, Jansson offers Finland's national independence in 1917 and escape from Russian rule as one possibility: "This paved the way for a new sense of freedom in the cultural area as well, and made writers perceptive to new impulses from continental Europe" (Jansson, "Swedish Modernism" 839; see also Stenport 487). The young authors of the 1920s established themselves as a new generation that had ambitious goals of connecting Finland to the rest of Europe and to international literary trends. For many, the hope was to escape being limited by the national frame of Finland and to become truly European (Olsson, *Ediths Brev* 48; Ekelund 81; Möller-Sibeliuss 31).

On the other hand, both the political and cultural climate of the country were extremely fraught post-independence, and it becomes evident in the letters between Edith

Södergran and Hagar Olsson in the 1920s that they were battling a largely conservative field (Olsson, *Ediths Brev* 44, 63, 116). Finland-Swedish modernists received little support at first – they were often neglected by more conservative Finland-Swedish critics and authors, while remaining unknown to a larger Finnish-speaking audience – and their attempts at creating transnational support networks didn't always succeed.¹⁰⁵ Riikonen, in his account of Finnish-speaking modernists, echoes this cultural conservatism when listing reasons for the late “adaption” of modernism in Finland: “It was a question of language barrier, but also of Finland’s nationalistic and political situation. At the same time modern experiments were often condemned by conservative and academic literary critics, who aligned modernism variously with immorality, Marxism and psychoanalysis” (Riikonen 853).

In the end, the relationship between the terms “periphery” and “belated” is one always characterized by tension: even though countries such as the Nordic ones (and especially their rural areas) have held a peripheral position economically and politically, this should not blur the fact that in the *cultural* formation of the Modern Breakthrough and, later on, modernism, the Nordic countries at times held an important and even pathbreaking role. Groups such as the Finland-Swedish modernists – despite their peripheral location and status – complicate any straightforward narratives of the belated arrival of modernisms in the North.

¹⁰⁵ As an example, Edith Södergran devoted her last years into translating Swedish modernist writing into German in the hopes of publishing a translated anthology of Finland-Swedish authors in Germany. The anthology, which was to include samples from Södergran, Elmer Diktonius, Hagar Olsson, and others, never materialized. Despite Hagar Olsson’s help, the two didn’t have sufficient networks or funds in order to find a publisher that could support such a production (Olsson, *Ediths Brev* 199).

Moving to the question of the regional, what many of these accounts and histories of Nordic modernisms bring out is the problematic relationship between urbanity and modernism. Even though transnational collections are often framed with an urban bias, their chapters and articles focusing on Nordic modernisms produce a type of counter-narrative to the locations typically associated with modernism. For example, the *Cambridge Companion to European Modernism* already on its front cover highlights the urban nature of modernism, explaining how “[p]articular attention is given to the urban centers in which modernism developed – from Dublin to Zürich, Barcelona to Warsaw.” In contrast, Leonardo Lisi’s chapter on Scandinavian modernisms complicates the common thesis that modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness were grounded in metropolitan experience (202). Lisi makes Knut Hamsun’s *Mysterier* (1892) a case in point, claiming that “[t]he immediate predecessor to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is thus arguably to be found not in St. Petersburg, Vienna, Paris or London, but in a small coastal town in Norway” (200). Though the rural nature of the North is sometimes highlighted as a reason for the late arrival of modernisms (Povlsen 855), there are scholars such as Lisi who produce a different point of view: instead of delaying modernism, perhaps the agrarian circumstances in the Nordic countries created a rural or regional modernism that goes against the typical hype of urbanity in modernist studies (see also Karkama; Riikonen; Stenport). Next, I will turn to analyze the central role that the countryside played in Nordic modernist representations well into the second half of the twentieth century.

4.3. VISIONS OF THE KARELIAN BORDERLAND: HAGAR OLSSON'S MODERNIST

WRITING

Men hur lycklig var jag inte, när jag väl kommit ut på landsvägen, den var just så solvarm och glad och full av leende behag som jag minns alla mina sommarvägar i Karelen. Hur väl trivdes inte min själ i denna natur och bland dessa gamla ryska villor . . . som låg inbäddade i den yppiga grönskan och tycktes hemlighetsfullt försjunkna i sitt blommande förfall. Detta var Ediths land, om sommaren skulle man se det. (Olsson, *Ediths Brev* 89)

But how delighted I was once I reached the country road, it was just as sun-warmed and happy and full of beaming contentment as I remember all my summer roads in Karelia having been. How well my soul flourished in this natural setting amidst these old Russian villas . . . embedded in lush greenness, they seemed to have fallen secretively into the prime of their decay. This was Edith's land, summer was the best time to see it.

In this idyllic manner Hagar Olsson describes her arrival at the Karelian town of Raivola in the summer of 1919 to visit her friend and colleague Edith Södergran. The biographical portrayal continues with details ranging from “underbara höga träden” (wondrous tall trees) to “den halvt ingenvuxna trädgården” (the half-wild garden) that are quite similar to the Karelian rural descriptions of her future novel *Träsnidaren och döden*, to be published twenty-one years later in 1940. When it comes to Finnish modernism, Karelia is most typically linked to Edith Södergran, who lived in isolation with her mother in the small Karelian town of Raivola for a large part of her life, until she died of

tuberculosis in 1923 at the age of thirty-one. During her time in Raivola, Södergran wrote her major works of modernist poetry, some of which incorporate the landscapes of her Karelian surroundings into rich dreamscapes. Some years after Södergran's death, other Finland-Swedish authors such as Olof Enckell, Tito Colliander, Göran Stenius, and Hagar Olsson picked up the subject of Karelia in their writings. According to Erik Ekelund, who calls this tradition "Karelsk exotism" (Karelian exoticism), Finland-Swedish modernists after Södergran's death turned Karelia into a modernist legend and artistic fantasy-play that was often far removed from the actual living conditions of the region (95). In Ekelund's view, the Karelian countryside became a fascinating location for the internationally-oriented modernists because it possessed a foreign glow as a borderland of different nationalities, languages, and exotic influences, such as the Greek-Orthodox religion (83-84).

To some extent it was accurate to understand the Karelian region as transnational and even cosmopolitan. Before the First World War, the Karelian Isthmus and particularly the town of Vyborg, with its close proximity to St. Petersburg, became the most cosmopolitan area within Finland. In Vyborg, artists were able to access foreign works not available in the capital of Helsinki or elsewhere in Finland at the time (Holmström, "Innerlighetens färdvägar" 87). The Karelian countryside and its small towns also functioned as a meeting place for some of the Finland-Swedish modernists; Olsson and Elmer Diktonius met Edith Södergran in Raivola (Olsson, *Ediths brev*), while Olsson became acquainted with Raoul af Hällström, soon-to-become co-editor of the modernist little magazine *Ultra*, during her travels in Terijoki (*Ediths brev* 190). At the same time, however, Karelia was a vast and largely provincial region that became partly

difficult to reach in the turmoil taking place after the formation of the Soviet Union. One must not be fooled by the above quotation of Olsson's idyllic biographical writing; more often than not, Olsson describes the rural small town of Raivola as a remote and impoverished location that imprisoned Södergran and cut her ties to the rest of the world (*Ediths brev* 90, 168, 180).

Even beyond Karelia and the Finland-Swedes, the countryside played a prominent role in the development of Finnish modernism. Indeed, connecting Finnish modernism with the spatial and regional expansion of modernist studies is worthwhile because countryside representations were not antagonistic to modernist aesthetics in the Finnish context. Instead, rural regions played an important part in many major modernist texts. Within Finnish society and culture, a pre-modern agrarian lifestyle and a modern urban tradition co-existed perhaps more clearly and for a longer time period than in Western European countries, and this became evident in modernist writing as well (Karkama 175). As Anna Möller-Sibeliuss has noted, many authors handled questions of modernity by positioning them in relation to the countryside idyll and by representing the tensions between urban and rural areas (246).¹⁰⁶

The larger "spatial turn" of recent literary scholarship has become visible within the Finnish field, as well; recent years have witnessed the publication of important spatial interventions dealing particularly with representations of urban spaces in modern and modernist writing (e.g. Ameen; Isomaa et al.; Veivo). The countryside and its small towns, on the other hand, have received less attention. So far, Finnish rural descriptions

¹⁰⁶ As will become evident in the final sections of this chapter, the same can be said of Nordic modernisms in general, where countryside representations have been a typical feature of modernist texts (see also Stenport 478-79).

have typically been analyzed in individual works and in accounts that focus on urban migration as an effect of modernization (e.g. Kaunonen; Karkama; Ruuska, *Arkeen pudonnut Sibylla*; Ruuska, “Kuin oltaisiin aina”).¹⁰⁷ Within Finland-Swedish scholarship, the countryside has been studied somewhat more in two distinct contexts: firstly, scholars have paid attention to folk narratives that portray the Swedish-speaking farmers and rural inhabitants of the Finnish coastal region at the turn of the twentieth century. These “lokalfärg” (local color) narratives have been analyzed in relation to the identity politics of the Finland-Swedish minority and the infamous language battles that were raging at the time (Ekman; Holmström, *Att ge röst*). Secondly, scholars have focused on the Finland-Swedish modernists’ biographical links to Karelia and their literary portrayals of the region (Ekelund; Holmström, *Hagar Olsson*; Holmström, “Innerlighetens färdvägar”).¹⁰⁸ I will refer to the first group of these studies a little later on in order to highlight how the pre-modernist local color and folk narratives differ from regional

¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Finnish literary scholarship has paid attention to peripheral and rural small town areas in the light of geocritical scholarship (Lappela; Sääskilahti), though these studies are outside the field of modernism. The central thesis within geocriticism – that literary representations have the ability to change and produce our everyday understandings of space (Prieto; Westphal) – is somewhat compatible with regionalism, which attempts to highlight the importance of rural representations in the production of a modern worldview. On the other hand, geocriticism is a postmodern framework which is not primarily interested in literary texts but in places, typically choosing one location and looking at as many textual representations (from as many authors and genres) of that place as possible (Lappela 4; Prieto 24; Westphal 131). In this sense, it differs from recent modernist spatial frameworks such as *geomodernism* (Doyle and Winkiel), which is interested primarily in literary representations and in analyzing multiple locations in a comparative manner.

Apart from countryside and small town representations, nature depictions have been analyzed quite at length within Finnish scholarship. As Fetterley and Pryse note, however, regional authors are not nature writers, even if they may be interested in physical landscapes such as the countryside (4).

¹⁰⁸ In addition to these studies, some scholars have analyzed the rural representations of individual Finland-Swedish authors both during and prior to modernism. For example, Anna Möller-Sibeliuss has analyzed Bertel Gripenberg’s nature and rural poetry from the first decades of the twentieth century, and Julia Tidigs has interpreted Jac. Ahrenberg’s portrayals of Karelia from the end of the nineteenth century (*Att skriva sig*).

modernism, while the second group of heavily biographical interpretations about Hagar Olsson's Karelian representations will function as a point of contrast to my own analysis.

As explained in the previous chapters, regional studies have recently gained prominence in American scholarship through feminist interventions that have shifted the definition of regionalism to signify minor literatures that focus on rural spaces and the political critiques such spaces bring forth (Fetterley and Pryse 11). So far, such scholarship has focused on American authors, while little to no research exists on the transnational features of regionalism, or on its manifestations in other national-linguistic contexts. By bringing together the Northern European countryside and feminist regional theory, my project expands the regional analytic and connects it to new linguistic-national literary archives. In the current and following sections, the idea is precisely to analyze how rural portrayals in Nordic modernisms are intertwined with intersectional critiques in the spirit of feminist regionalism. The central question is what meaning the rural holds within modernism; how are the countryside and its small towns imagined and constructed in my Nordic case studies, and what types of critical and political positions do the texts make possible through their rural representations?

To understand how modernist literary works focusing on rural Karelia or the generic Finnish countryside took part in significant political debates of their time, it is important to note that prior to modernism, such countryside locations in both Swedish- and Finnish-language literature in Finland often served as the backdrop for debates around nationality, language, and even race. Thus, before analyzing my regional modernist case studies, I want to take a step back to shortly contextualize the relationship

between the Finland-Swedish minority, rural representations, and questions of nationhood during the generation(s) directly prior to the modernist one.

Before the Finland-Swedish modernists became enthralled with Karelia, the rural borderland was in fact the birth place of the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* (1849), and thus Karelia became one of the central locations for the rise of Finnish nationalism and national romanticism during the last half of the nineteenth century, when the area of Finland was still an autonomous part of the Russian empire.¹⁰⁹ At this point in history, some of the Swedish-speaking Finns – who formed a minority in numbers yet were the cultural and capital elite of the land – took as their purpose to import to the country a sense of Finnish nationalism.¹¹⁰ Starting from the 1860s this project led into fierce language debates. As the status of the Finnish language began to rise, the survival of the Swedish one became dependent on active mobilization around language politics. The Swedish-speaking intelligentsia was consequently divided into three groups: the

¹⁰⁹ After the Swedish kingdom's 700-year rule over Finland, the Finnish region became an autonomous part of the Russian empire from 1809 until its independence in 1917. Yet, the Swedish influence remained strong in Finland during this time period; Swedish was the official administrative and cultural language of the area (thus, it was also the language of literature and research), and the cultural and capital elite of the region was a small number of Swedish-speaking Finns. I speak of "area" and "region" because, at the time, there existed no "nation" of Finland, nor a sense of Finnish nationhood within the population. This began to change during the nineteenth century as the Swedish-speaking intelligentsia started a conscious project of creating a sense of Finnish nationalism in order to fight the Russian rule.

One of the most significant tools in this project was the employment of national romanticism in art, and particularly the Karelian-based national epic *Kalevala* (1849) held a central role in creating an origin story and mythology for the Finnish people. *Kalevala* was compiled by Elias Lönnrot, who collected (and heavily edited) Karelian and Finnish oral folklore and mythology during his trips in various parts of Finland, mostly in Karelia.

¹¹⁰ Prior to the twentieth century, there existed no concept of a Finland-Swedish minority in Finland; even during the language debates, many Swedish-speaking inhabitants considered themselves as Finns regardless of their mother tongue. While the large majority of the population in Finland was Finnish-speaking and rural, the smaller Swedish-speaking group lived largely in Helsinki and along the Western and Southern coast of the Baltic Sea. It was the urban and upper-class Swedish-speaking inhabitants who formed the political, cultural, and capital intelligentsia of the country.

“svekomans,” who wanted to uphold the primary status of the Swedish language; the “fennomans,” who instead sought to raise the Finnish language to be the official administrative and cultural language of the soon-to-become nation; and the indifferent liberals, who were more concerned with who would rule the land, rather than in which language that might happen. (Ekman 12-13, 27). Eventually, this led to the creation of a Swedish minority identity in Finland, and the possibility for authors to define themselves for the first time as “Finland-Swedish” (Ekman 12-13; Tidigs, “Here I am at home” 366).¹¹¹

While Karelia and inland natural landscapes held center stage for Finnish (and particularly Finnish-language) nationalism, some of the svekomans fighting for the status of the Swedish language turned towards another rural location; the coastal region of Finland along the Baltic Sea, where a large number of Swedish-speaking Finns lived at the time (see Zilliacus; Ekman). Roger Holmström has studied how multiple Swedish-speaking authors began to produce local color and folk-life narratives (“lokalfärg,” “folkklivsberättelser”) about this coastal area – and particularly its southern region Uusimaa (Nyland in Swedish) – during the heated debates over language and nation from the 1880s all the way to the 1930s. According to Holmström, this Swedish-language literary tradition that relied on folk narratives attempted to bring attention to marginalized people and locations; particularly the members of the rural, Swedish-speaking lower classes who worked as farmers and peasants along the coast (*Att ge röst* 21-23, 170). The turn-of-the-century local color texts located on the southern coast had a clear political agenda; they attempted to raise awareness about the rural Swedish-speaking population

¹¹¹ In fact, the term “Finland-Swedish” came into common use only in the 1910s (Ekman 13).

and inform the masses – i.e. the urban and upper class Swedish-speakers – about the customs of its own “people” (19-20).¹¹² At the same time, the quest for finding natural images charged specifically with Swedish meaning was an attempt to convince the coastal peasantry that it shared an identity in common with the Swedish-speaking upper classes (Zilliacus 42). Thus, the rural texts can be seen as a part of the *svekomans* project of uniting Swedish-speaking inhabitants in Finland by artistically constructing both a shared, Swedish-speaking cultural history and a coastal natural imagery that competed with the inland descriptions associated with *Kalevala* and Finnishness.

This politicized concern for the forgotten and marginalized rural peasants reveals the divide between the two groups that formed the Swedish-speaking minority population in Finland. On the one hand, there was the rural folk of the coastal region that was largely forgotten by the ruling class, and on the other hand, the ruling class of the urban areas which preferred to identify as “Finnish” (meaning Finnish nationality) rather than specifically “Swedish-speaking” (Ekman 25). These two groups shared nothing beyond their mother tongue, and the small group of urban-based *svekomans* had a difficult time in reaching either group in their battle for the Swedish language. Eventually, the

¹¹² At first sight, such rural narratives that bring forth marginalized voices and locations sound very similar to the regional texts that Fetterley and Pryse have studied. Yet, the implied audience and political agenda of these Swedish-language narratives differ from regionalism (and regional modernism) in the same manner that Fetterley and Pryse separate local color from the regional tradition within the American context. Most importantly, local color narratives are typically directed to an (urban) audience outside the described, marginalized location. For example, rural small towns can be portrayed with an exoticizing, ethnographic, or touristy tone in local color writing, while regionalism employs a point of view that is firmly local (5-7). The local color and folk life narratives that Holmström describes belong to the former group, since their agenda was to enlighten the urban, upper class Swedish-speakers of a region and people largely unknown to them. These distinctions between local color writing and regionalism, however, are not always easy to draw. For example, in her analysis of Swedish-speaking Jac. Ahrenberg’s portrayals of Karelia from the latter half of the nineteenth century, Julia Tidigs highlights how the texts’ narrator functions as a “guide” to the Karelian region while maintaining a local and un-exoticizing point of view (*Att skriva sig* 159).

svekoman movement became completely marginalized in mainstream politics. Particularly hurtful to its reputation were attempts to develop a theory of Swedish nationality in Finland – with strong ties to Sweden – which quickly turned into outright racism, as some of the movement’s participants pushed forward ideas of the Finns as an inferior, “Mongolian” race in contrast to the Swedish and Scandinavian people (Ekman 32-33).

Despite ultimately failing, the svekoman project and its racialization of Finns deeply affected the development of modernist art in Finland. Due to attempts to strengthen the newly-emerged Finnish nation-state and the Finnish language, the art scene continued to be heavily influenced by national romanticism throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. One of the only major avant-garde art groups in Finland, called the “Marraskuun ryhmä” (November Group), differed radically in aesthetic style from the national romantic mainstream, particularly since they incorporated primitivist features that were common in international cubist and expressionist art at the time (Huusko 561). Timo Huusko has analyzed how the group’s paintings – particularly those of its leading figure, Tyko Sallinen – became racialized in a 1919 Copenhagen exhibition on Nordic art. Scandinavian critics identified the group’s primitivist aesthetics as “authentic representations of the primitive Finn, often in a negative, disparaging way, following the Svekoman bias against the Finnish-speaking Finnish population” (563-64). According to these critics, the primitive Finn as represented in the avant-garde paintings was marked by “Mongolian” and “Asian” features (564). Consequently, the avant-garde style of the Marraskuun ryhmä became marginalized in the art scene of Finland, as conservative cultural critics saw national

romanticism as a more suitable venue for promoting a Finnish national agenda and countering the degrading racialization of Finns. In other words, due to the political and cultural context of the early twentieth century, it was difficult for an experimental, Finnish modernism or avant-garde art to emerge.

Following these debates and processes of nationalism, Finnish became the second official language of the country, the Swedish-speaking group began to lose its cultural and economic dominance, and, during the first decades of the twentieth century, the concept of the Finland-Swedish minority was born, along with the birth of the independent Finnish nation in 1917. National literature, which until the latter half of the nineteenth century had been mostly written in Swedish, witnessed a strong Finnish-language boom, consequently turning Swedish-language literature into a minority one for the first time in Finland's history.¹¹³ In other words, immediately prior to the modernist generation, the linguistic power balance began to shift in the country and the Swedish-speaking Finns, who had once had cultural and capital dominance, suddenly found themselves identifying with the position of a minority group.

This history paints regional modernist texts such as Hagar Olsson's *Träsnidaren och döden* in a somewhat peculiar light. Why would the modernist generation of the Finland-Swedes – shortly after the birth of the group's identification as a minority – turn towards Karelia, the site of Finnish and particularly Finnish-language romanticism and

¹¹³ See also Julia Tidigs' insightful discussion of language politics and their effect on Finland-Swedish minority literature in the early 1900s. As Tidigs explains in her article, "Literature came to be the most cherished of Finland-Swedish arts and its vitality was considered a sign of the linguistically defined Finland-Swedes' viability. The writer was given the task of writing *proper* Swedish. In other words, the deterritorialization of Swedish in Finland was to be countered with reterritorialization" ("Here I am at home" 366). Tidigs analyzes how Finland-Swedish modernist author Elmer Diktonius used multilingualism in his works to complicate and counter such ideals around language, minority identity, and nationality.

nationalism? And how does such an “inward” turn fit in with the generation’s otherwise international tone and cosmopolitan ambitions? At first sight this fascination with Karelia does, indeed, seem to clash with the group’s internationally-oriented agenda, but a look at the larger historical context of the 1920s can provide some answers. As Anna Möller-Sibeliu8 has noted, the 1920s in Finland was in general a time period of significant oppositions between national and international, old and new, rural and urban, left and right, Swedish and Finnish, as well as woman and man (231). Although Finland was not explicitly a part of the First World War, global politics affected the region and indirectly led to its independence from Russia (and consequent Civil War) in 1917. Thus, even in Finland, modernists such as Hagar Olsson experienced the First World War as a breaking point not only politically and societally, but also in terms of literary history. In her 1925 essay “Dikten och illusionen” (The Poem and Illusion), Olsson describes the modernist generation as rising from the ashes of the war (see also Gustafsson 189). In short, the Finland-Swedish modernist writers who emerged during this time period identified themselves as a new generation that wanted to create ties to Europe and to new, international literary movements (Möller-Sibeliu8 231; Ekelund 81). Olsson became a strong proponent of modernist and avantgarde arts because she saw them as deeply political; unlike the old art for art’s sake traditions, modernist literature would pave the way for a new, utopian world (Gustafsson 188-90).

Whereas the authors of the prior Swedish-speaking generation had attempted to distinguish themselves as a political and cultural group of their own, Olsson’s generation sought to leave the language debates behind in order to lift Finnish culture as a whole to a new, international level. A case in point is the first modernist magazine *Ultra*, which was

bilingual from the start and took as its aim to present both local modernist artists as well as foreign authors and trends unknown to the larger Finnish audience. As the editorial staff of *Ultra* describe in 1922, art that can only be understood by the people of a single nation is “svag konst” (weak art) and, consequently, modernists need to move beyond the national to the international. Through such essays, Finland-Swedish modernists like Olsson self-consciously constructed their group as an international one. In her 1928 essay, “Finländsk Robinsonad,” published in the modernist magazine *Quosego*, Olsson further argues that Finland-Swedes are neither Swedish nor Finnish nor Russian but instead – drawing from all these cultures – their spirit is “allmänt mänsklig” (129, human in general). Therefore, it is the Finland-Swedish modernists’ cultural job to give Finland an “internationell klang” (129, international tone; see also Ekelund 81-82). What becomes visible in these writings is the difficulty of imagining a completely post-national world; even when Olsson emphasizes internationalism, her argument is based on the idea that Finnish national culture can and *should* be saved by proving that it can reach an international level, instead of being “merely” national and local.

Despite a move from Swedish-speaking nationalism to internationalism, the rural remained a significant literary location in Finland-Swedish modernist writing. The modernist generation left behind the coastal area that was previously used to strengthen the Swedish identity, and turned instead towards Karelia, the cradle of Finnish culture. According to Erik Ekelund, the modernists’ fascination with Karelia is, in fact, not at all surprising when considering the region’s borderland characteristics. For the internationally-minded modernists, the vast Karelia with its mixture of Finnish and Russian customs, speech habits, and architecture provided an excellent representative for

what they were searching for (83-84). In short, the cultural influences from Russia made Karelia feel foreign, international, and exotic.

Though the international feel of Karelia surely appealed to the modernists, I would like to complicate Ekelund's argument a little by considering how Olsson's views changed during the course of the interwar period. Many scholars have noted how the young Hagar Olsson of the 1920s had a much more utopian and deterministic understanding of the victories of the modernist movement than did her later self (Gustafsson 189; Rees 122). As Olsson reminisces in her commentary to Edith Södergran's letters, at the turn of the 1920s

Vi var okända och fattiga och levde i en avkrok av världen och ändå kände vi oss som furstar . . . Vi upplevde vår ungdom som en oerhörd chans: att få vara ung på tröskeln till en ny värld. (Olsson, *Ediths brev* 48).

We were unknown and poor and lived at the back of beyond and yet we felt as though we were princes . . . We lived our youth as an enormous possibility; to be young on the threshold of the new world.

These international hopes for a new collectivism were later darkened by the rise of fascism and the threat of a new war. As Hampus Gustafsson has explained in his analysis of Olsson's essays, the modernist post-war generation slowly turned into a pre-war generation and, consequently, Olsson became more skeptical towards modernism and its utopian possibilities (198, 200).

I would argue that these changes in Olsson's thinking are also part of the reason why her 1920s focus on internationalism turned into something more complicated in her later texts centering on Karelia. Olsson's two major texts that deal with Karelia – her

1940 novel *Träsnidaren och döden* as well as her 1941 essay “Kalevala och Karelen” (Kalevala and Karelia) – were both published during the Second World War when Finland was at war with the Soviet Union and lost significant parts of the Finnish region of Karelia. What strikes me in both of these texts is their complex, at times contradictory consideration of national culture. Rather than being a celebration of internationalism, these later works in Olsson’s career seem to point towards Karelia as a location that can complicate nationalist ideas and possibly provide a means for global empathy. It is these two texts, and particularly the novel *Träsnidaren och döden*, that I will turn to next in order to analyze what kinds of political commentaries Olsson is able to stage through a rural Karelian setting.

In her essay “Kalevala och Karelen,” Olsson is quite explicit about her thoughts concerning Karelia and the way in which it has been employed within Finnish culture. Olsson draws a short history of how Karelia has been understood at various peak political points in Finland’s recent history, and she is particularly critical towards the anti-Russian, national sentiments that became prevalent after Finland’s independence. In Olsson’s view, the national epic *Kalevala* was consciously dislocated from its Karelian roots to downplay the role of Russian cultural influence post-independence (144-45). The focus of the essay is Olsson’s prediction that Karelia, having been lost to the Soviet Union during the Winter War (1939-40), has regained its importance as a cultural and literary location. Olsson argues that this sudden loss will give birth to a new wave of “karelianism” in art; a version of Karelia that will perhaps be deeper, more invested in “folk” culture (*folkligare*), and less aesthetic than previous representations (145-46).

Instead of turning towards a national mourning where Karelia should be reconquered both culturally and politically for the Finns, Olsson suggests something much more striking and revolutionary: an understanding of Karelia and its evacuees as a representative for the losses felt globally by all the refugees dislocated by the Second World War (147). I would argue that in Olsson's essay, the imperative to be more "folk" is not to paint Karelia in a Finnish national tone, but rather to pay attention to people who are poor, marginalized, and homeless. Similarly, *Kalevala* gains new currency because the themes it depicts – such as the sorrow of losing one's golden childhood region with all its natural elements – are now echoed and longed for throughout the war-ridden world (147). In Olsson's essay, both the joys and sorrows of the Karelian region reach a universal, post- or transnational significance; instead of Karelia or *Kalevala* functioning as deeply nationalistic symbols, they are employed on a new, global level as opportunities for collective empathy.¹¹⁴

When it comes to the novel *Träsnidaren och döden*, however, Olsson's political commentary and visions of (post-)nationalism become much more ambiguous. The narrative follows Finnish wood sculptor Myyriäinen as he loses inspiration for his artistic work and leaves his mother and his suburban home located on the fringes of a loud, vast city to travel eastward (towards Karelia), back to the sites of his childhood. At first sight, the novel echoes many of the associations regarding Karelia that Olsson explores in "Kalevala och Karelen." For example, both the novel and the essay connect Karelia to childhood nostalgia and a longing for nature. Beginning with the first pages and

¹¹⁴ For an analysis of the relationship between tradition and utopia in Olsson's earlier texts, even with reference to *Kalevala*, see Meurer-Bongardt (*Wo Atlantis*).

continuing throughout the novel, Myyriäinen muses about the places he spent his childhood in, connecting them to fable-like milieus:

Han hade en gång haft del i skogarnas urliv, sagodjur, troll och fantom hade varit hans sällskap och mossbelupna stenar och gråa urberg hade mumlande undervisat honom. Hans liv hade varit fyllt av förtrolighet och gemenskap med tingen och ingen ensamhet hade funnits i hans ögon . . . Hur hade han kommit hit, till detta unkna rum där allt var honom främmande och förhatligt? (*Träsnidaren och döden* 19-20)

Once he had taken part in the forests' primal life; fairy-tale beasts, trolls, and phantoms had been his company; and moss-covered stones and gray boulders, ages old, had given him murmuring instruction. His life had been filled by a familiarity and community with the things of nature, and in his eyes there had been no loneliness . . . How had he come to this place, to this musty room where all was strange and hateful to him? (*Woodcarver and Death* 12-13)

Here, the countryside becomes a site of nostalgic and fantastical dreaming, a place in which fairytale animals, trolls, and personified natural objects exist and are able to communicate with the human. Furthermore, the rural is a place of true connection and closeness, in stark contrast to the “främmande” (foreign) and lonely nature of the suburban room Myyriäinen inhabits at the start of the novel. The majority of the story follows Myyriäinen as he, inspired by these memory-images, leaves to find his lost homeland and ultimately arrives in a Karelian village where he begins a new life with a small community of misfit characters. In addition to the previous associations made

between fable-like creatures, nature, and connectedness, the Karelia that Myyriäinen encounters is further linked to a simple and child-like way of life, as he describes the local people he encounters during his journey:

Han såg dem för sig i klara färger, som man ser bilderna i en sagobok, och han hade ett livligt intryck av att dessa människor allesammans var barn, stora klumpiga godmodiga barn som byggt sig en egen by någonstans i en stilla vrå . . . Här måste gemenskapen finnas, för här fanns barnasinet. (*Träsnidaren och döden* 63)

He saw them before him in clear colors, as one sees the pictures in a storybook, and he had a vivid impression that all these people were actually children, big, clumsy, good-natured children who had built a village of their own somewhere in a quiet corner . . . A community must exist there, for there dwelt a childlike spirit. (*Woodcarver and Death* 50-51)

The representation of Myyriäinen's consciousness reveals the idea of Karelia as a utopian diaspora to the homeless modern human. The narration moves from indirect discourse detailing Myyriäinen's sensations and associations to an evaluative, gnomic-like statement about community: a child-like and clumsy way of life allows true collectivity between people. This final statement, given in free indirect discourse, leaves open its source and can be traced back to either Myyriäinen or the nameless narrator. It hovers in the air as a seemingly objective, factual statement that later is proven to be true. As soon as Myyriäinen has spent his first day in the Karelian small town, he feels connection and peace: "Han kände ingen smärta eller saknad, endast en fullkomnad

tillhörighets djupa lugn” (95).¹¹⁵ Thus, the rural landscape becomes a location where people can re-connect with their roots and with one another – a mode of living clearly preferable to the urban.

Traditionally, interpretations of Olsson’s novel have focused precisely on these aspects of communal experience, childhood nostalgia, and Karelian utopianism. Firstly, Olsson’s novel has been interpreted as critical towards Western culture and its excessive individualism and intellectualism. For example, Roger Holmström has emphasized Olsson’s interest in Byzantine culture, the Greek-Orthodox religion, and Eastern mysticism to biographically explain why Olsson chose the eastern rural area of Karelia as the mystic and utopian milieu of her novel (“Innerlighetens färdvägar”; see also Ekelund 93). In these accounts, Karelia and its communal feel represent a contrast and an alternative setting to the problems inherent to Western culture.

Secondly, Karelia has been seen as a utopian and nostalgic childhood site. In a speech given on the celebration of Olsson’s 50th birthday, Olof Lagercrantz argued that the Karelia of *Träsnidaren och döden* is a landscape above all national borders; a site of simplicity, freedom, childhood, and wander, untouched by war (Holmström, “Innerlighetens färdvägar” 93; see also Ekelund 93-94). Previous Finland-Swedish scholarship has noted how Karelia has such utopian or legendary potential because it is “Landet som icke är” (The land that is not), as the poem by Edith Södergran suggests (Ekelund 85; Holmström, “Innerlighetens färdvägar” 93).¹¹⁶ In other words, Karelia represents a legendary or mythological place, rather than an actual worldly location. In

¹¹⁵ “He had no sensation of pain or loss, only the deep peace of a perfect sense of belonging” (*Woodcarver and Death* 79).

¹¹⁶ Södergran’s final poetry collection, *Landet som icke är* (1925), was published posthumously and titled according to one of its poems.

Olsson's biography, Roger Holmström explains how the legend-like milieu description of Karelia in *Träsnidaren och döden* stems from the shock Olsson experienced once the Karelian Isthmus was lost to the Soviet Union (*Hagar Olsson* 305). It is Karelia's status as something lost – both in an abstract manner as the site of childhood, as well as later on in a concrete manner through the Winter and Continuation Wars – that allows its utopian and mystic handling. According to Ekelund, this romanticizing (and exoticizing) of Karelia was a common feature of Finland-Swedish modernist writing and culminated in Olsson's texts (95).

These previous analyses of *Träsnidaren och döden* have done a significant job in bringing to light the connections between Olsson's life, the historical context of the novel's publication, and the novel's descriptions of Karelia. However, I want to push back on some of these interpretations and suggest that a feminist regional lens can complicate a reading of the text as merely nostalgic for a rural past or as showcasing Karelian exoticism and romanticism.

Unlike in regional scholarship at large, where regionalism is understood through a focus on countryside depictions, the feminist definition by Fetterley and Pryse highlights regionalism's ability to criticize various hegemonic discourses from aggressive masculinity to imperialism (30).¹¹⁷ Thus, representations of rural milieus or a nostalgic longing for a rural past do not yet count as regional literature in the feminist analytic. Instead, regional texts tell unconventional stories that are dialogic and understand categories such as region and gender as discursive phenomena, rather than as essential

¹¹⁷ This is one of the significant differences between feminist and traditional accounts of regionalism, since the latter often sees regional literature as being based on nostalgia. See, for example, Bibi Jonsson's discussion of nostalgic and ethnocentric Swedish regionalism in "Det regionala blir centralt."

truths (30, 37). Taking Fetterley and Pryse's remapping of regionalism into account, I will use the remainder of this section to argue that *Träsnidaren och döden* is a regional text precisely in this critical, feminist manner. It is through a complex discussion of nationalism that Olsson's novel moves from past-oriented nostalgia as well as essentializing and exoticizing views of Karelia towards a more future-oriented political critique.

As I discussed in my analysis of Willa Cather's prairie novels, local color and regional literature in the United States have often taken part in contemporary discussions about American culture and nationalism. American rural depictions have debated the relationship between specific regions and the entire nation-state, and what it means to belong to the American empire in the modern world (Cadle; Duck; Kaplan; Poll). This framework provides an interesting point of comparison to Finnish regional modernism and to the politics of Olsson's novel, since I argue that the Karelian representations of *Träsnidaren och döden* are heavily connected to ideas regarding Finland and Finnish nationality. In addition to the connections made to childhood nostalgia and mythical nature early on in the novel, the rural Karelian milieu becomes also connected to Finnish culture and people. In fact, Myyriäinen sees Karelia not only as an origin home for his own childhood, but for the Finnish "folk" (people) broadly speaking: "Det var inte längre bara hans barndoms landskap, det var något annat och mera, den jungfruliga mark där hans folk hade funnit sin själ och där hans egen längtan hade sitt urhem" (37).¹¹⁸ Additionally, Myyriäinen makes it clear that he wants to use his art to interpret the depths

¹¹⁸ "It was no longer just his childhood's landscape, it was something else and something more, it was the virgin land where his people had found its soul and where his own yearning had its primal home" (*Woodcarver and Death* 27).

of his own “folk” and to follow the footsteps of previous Finnish literary classics such as *Seitsemän veljestä* (1870, *Seven Brothers*) in order to make his people better known (16).¹¹⁹ Furthermore, he reveals an interesting colonial critique towards any “främlingen” (stranger) who does not understand the innermost depths and secrets of the people in the Karelian region (*Träsnidaren och döden* 36; *Woodcarver and Death* 27).

Consequently, the novel portrays surprisingly nationalistic views of Karelia through Myyriäinen’s internal focalization. To an extent, Myyriäinen’s thinking represents exactly the type of Karelian exoticism and romanticism that some scholars have analyzed the novel as endorsing. However, I would argue that a nuanced analysis of the novel’s narrative voice can offer a counter-reading to these earlier interpretations. Despite Myyriäinen’s thoughts, the novel as a whole is able to portray essentializing and nationalist ideas from an ironic distance, produce polyphony, and consequently complicate the text’s understanding of Karelia.

This critical distance comes about through Olsson’s use of an omniscient-like narrator who has access not only to Myyriäinen’s mind but to the private thoughts of all the other central characters, as well. On the first pages of the novel, the narrator moves closely and empathetically with Myyriäinen’s thoughts, presenting the typical skills of an omniscient heterodiegetic narrator who can detail its protagonists’ consciousness with

¹¹⁹ Myyriäinen makes an intertextual reference to Aleksis Kivi’s *Seitsemän veljestä* (1870, *Seven brothers*) a canonical example of early Finnish realism, as he hopes to follow in the footsteps of such a literary masterpiece: “En kväll hade han läst i den odödliga krönikan om de sju bröderna, och tanken att han själv skulle kunna gå i mästarens fotspår och med sin enkla konst bidra till kännedomen om detta folk som inte liknade något annat folk i världen grep honom med makten av en uppenbarelse” (16). In the English translation, “One evening he had read passages from the immortal chronicle of the seven brothers, and the thought that he himself might walk in the master’s steps, contributing with his simple art to the knowledge of this people which did not resemble any other on the face of the earth, seized him with the force of a revelation” (*Woodcarver and Death* 9).

direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse. Yet, as the story progresses, the narrative style starts to change. First, the narrator begins to show more authority and personality, taking a clear stance towards Myyriäinen's actions and even ridiculing him at times. In one significant instance, the narrator depicts Myyriäinen's nationalistic thoughts as questionable by framing him as a pious hermit intoxicated by visions and withdrawn into his dream world: "Som en from eremit inneslöt han sig i sin drömvärld och berusade sig med syner" (16-17).¹²⁰

In her transnational research on Nordic women modernists, Ellen Rees has analyzed Hagar Olsson's self-conscious modernist ambiguity that manifests not only thematically but within narrative structures, as well. When analyzing Olsson's earlier novel *Chitambo* (1933), Rees highlights how the text's double narrative structure shows the younger narrator as a fool through the eyes of her older self, consequently creating ambiguity about the novel's values and ideals (134). I would suggest that a similar narrative trick happens in *Träsnidaren och döden*, whenever the narrator ridicules Myyriäinen and takes an ironic distance to him. Such narratorial distance simultaneously creates ambiguity regarding the novel's relationship to nationalism, suggesting that the narrator might not share or endorse Myyriäinen's thoughts after all.

Despite changing its tone and distance to Myyriäinen, the narrative voice remains within the framework of heterodiegetic narration until the second chapter of the novel, where the narrator drops a sudden clue about its collective identity and relation to the storyworld. When describing the locations of Myyriäinen's travels, the narrator asks "Vem känner dessa fördrömda traktens förtrollning? Vi som levat bland detta folk utan att

¹²⁰ "He enclosed himself within his dream-world like a pious hermit, intoxicating himself on visions inspired by his melancholy sense of humor" (*Woodcarver and Death* 10).

tillhöra det” (28).¹²¹ All of a sudden, the narrator is part of a “vi” (we) that claims to have lived amongst the rural Karelian people. At the same time, the narrator’s remark about not belonging (“tillhöra”) to the local people creates an ambiguous insider/outsider perspective, which is further complicated by additional references to “vår by” (37, 60, our village). At first, these references to a collective and local identity are few and scattered, but once Myyriäinen enters the small town he settles into halfway through the novel, an explicit we-narrator emerges and begins to describe the rural town from a collective point of view: “Vår by kan tyckas oansenlig och föga betydande, så undanskynd som den ligger i utkanten av socknen” (86).¹²² The narration continues with a lengthy description that contrasts the village’s modest appearance from an outsider perspective to what it truly was like from the point of view of the locals.

Though the narrator’s exact identity is never revealed, these remarks throughout the novel increasingly imply that the narrator is in fact some sort of voice of the Karelian townspeople. But who exactly belongs to this “we” (is someone speaking on behalf of the town?) and how can a character or group of characters within the storyworld have access to the private thoughts of Myyriäinen and others? To answer these questions and to understand how the gradual change of narrative frames from third person to first-person plural affects the novel’s national and nostalgic themes discussed above, let us turn to narrative theory.

Questions of community, communal voice, and collective experience have served quite a marginal position within narrative theory in the past, with the significant

¹²¹ “Who knows the magic of these regions, lost in their dreams? We who have lived among this folk as outsiders” (*Woodcarver and Death* 20).

¹²² “Our village can seem insignificant and of little importance, lying secluded as it does in an out-of-the-way corner of the parish” (*Woodcarver and Death* 71).

exception of feminist narratology, which has attempted to expand narratology's focus on the individual self and examine questions of community and communal voice, as well (e.g. Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*). Recently, a heightened interest for such questions has risen particularly in relation to we-narration (Bekhta; Fludernik; Marcus; Maxey; Richardson). Brian Richardson has famously argued that it is most useful to see we-narrators "as a different kind of figure from the realistic type of first person narrator," because we-narrators are not bound by the epistemological rules of realism (58). In a similar manner, Monika Fludernik has stated that we-novels, while representing "the most extended form of communal narrative, putting the collective at their very center" (149), simultaneously "force readers into accepting vague or even quite un-verisimilar situations of narration" (153).¹²³ Furthermore, accounts of we-narration have often highlighted how it is difficult or even impossible to discern who belongs to the narrating "we," and consequently many have interpreted an individual lurking behind the collective mask, speaking on behalf of a group (e.g. Margolin 599; cf. Richardson 57-58).

These we-narration theories, however, have received criticism for promoting a Western worldview that centers on the individual self and sees consciousness as a private, inaccessible, and autonomous matter (e.g. Marcus). Natalya Bekhta has eloquently argued that the we-narrator, instead of being a "postmodern first person narrator who refuses to be bound by the epistemological rules of realism," as Richardson has claimed, is instead a "new first-person *plural* narrator, whose nature it is to possess *collective* epistemological, perspectival, and other qualities and thus create new *rules of (collective)*

¹²³ Richardson's and Fludernik's conclusions about we-narration are thus quite alike, even though Fludernik stresses the reader's ability to naturalize we-narration's storytelling to some extent (in line with her approach of natural narratology), while Richardson's opposing unnatural paradigm emphasizes the form's unnatural and unrealistic qualities.

realism” (Bekhta 170). Thus, in Bekhta’s view, a “we-narrator creates a holistic supraindividual level that supercedes a mere aggregation of individual characters and thus cannot be identified with or reduced to an ‘I’ speaking on behalf of such a group” (165).

I agree with Bekhta’s revised understanding of we-narration and suggest that the narrator in *Träsnidaren och döden* is a case of collective subjectivity; not an individual speaking on behalf of the town or feigning to represent a bigger group, but a collective voice with collective storytelling agency. Though the novel’s narrative style has not previously received scholarly attention, a collective understanding of the narrative voice fits with earlier interpretations regarding the novel as critiquing excessive individualism. This also explains the epistemological question of access to other characters’ thoughts. Even though Alan Palmer has used examples of we-narration as proof for his narratological “social minds” theory, calling texts such as William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (1930) a “notable example” of intermental thought (41), I would stress, along with Bekhta, that another type of collective act besides thinking takes place in such narratives:

That a town community in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” for example, knows what happened behind the closed doors of one of its neighbors is not a transgression of narratorial epistemological limitations—since we are not talking about singular I-narrator—but a property of a community where knowledge circulates with the help of gossip. (Bekhta 171)

Instead of proving the existence of intermental thinking or breaking the epistemological limits of non-omniscient narrators, modernist texts such as “A Rose for Emily” or *Träsnidaren och döden* rather thematize the layering of collective gossiping

and oral storytelling through their use of we-narration. Information about Myyriäinen's inner thoughts can be read as a result of the town collective's oral storytelling and gossiping practices – activities which the narrator often highlights in the midst of narration and which also connect back to the larger topics of nationalism and folk culture. In the end, there is nothing “realistically impossible” or “weird” in such instances of first-person plural telling and knowing, as scholars such as Fludernik have suggested (151-52). The only surprising element in Olsson's novel is a literary one; the late revelation of a we-narrator and, consequently, the audience's need to switch narrative frames in the midst of reading.

To return to the topic of nationalism, in contrast to Myyriäinen's essentialist ideas discussed above, the collective we-narrator asserts the rather constructed, artistic, and even mythologized nature of Karelia by highlighting the role of storytelling in the production of such regions. The text deals with this topic on several levels: the narrator emphasizes the importance and function of gossip in the construction of the town's community, and even Myyriäinen himself becomes a part of the town through oral storytelling practices (*Träsnidaren och döden* 87). Additionally, the novel summarizes multiple oral stories that have circulated around town about new members who have moved in over the years (e.g. 87-90) and the narrative includes direct quotations from Karelian folklore songs and old Finnish poems, such as an excerpt from Aleksis Kivi's poem “Sydämeni laulu” (25, “Song of my heart”). This focus on oral stories and legends is further connected with fairytale elements in the minds of the characters, who see themselves as fable-like creatures. Myyriäinen's new-found friend Sabine is referred to as the little mermaid (147), and Myyriäinen becomes renamed as “Myran,” meaning Ant

(138). Lastly, the ending of the novel emphasizes storytelling one final time by describing Myyriäinen and his new “family” as about to begin a new and even more enchanted fairytale; “en ny och ännu förtrollande saga” (226).

The novel as a whole, then, can be interpreted as one of the oral stories of the Karelian town that centers on its new members – in this case, on Myyriäinen. Rural Karelia becomes, in a sense, the sum of all the oral stories, songs, and gossips told about it. In other words, the region of Karelia is portrayed as an artistically and discursively constructed place, rather than as a nationalist and essentialist origin home. We-narration also allows for an insider perspective into the rural Karelian small town that contrasts the touristy and possibly exoticizing views of outsiders such as Myyriäinen. For Fetterley and Pryse, such an insider perspective is what makes regionalism different from its local color predecessors; “instead of a region being looked *at* from a tourist consumption perspective,” regionalism shifts focus “to a looking *with*” (36). *Träsnidaren och döden* allows these different perspectives – outsider looking at, insider looking with – to coexist without definite subordination of one or the other, thus producing a polyphonic account of Karelia. As explained with regards to the engaging omniscient narrator of Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*, Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony relies on the equality of different voices. A multitude of points of view is not in and of itself a guarantee of polyphony, since such points of view can simultaneously be hierarchically ordered. Even though Olsson’s narrator at times makes tongue-in-cheek remarks about Myyriäinen and his intoxicated state, the novel holds contradicting ideas even within the narrator, who at times seems to empathize with Myyriäinen, at others pushes back on his ideas or simply lets him speak without any sort of commentary.

I want to conclude by highlighting that the artistically and socially constructed nature of rural Karelia does not undermine the region's importance as a unique site that can inspire towards what the novel sees as the actual goal of real art: depicting a collective humanity of people realizing their sameness with one another. As Myyriäinen settles in the Karelian town, he forms a new family that crosses boundaries of both age, gender, and geographic origin. This family includes characters such as Sabine, a young girl whose suffering nature is reminiscent of Buddha himself (*Träsnidaren och döden* 97); uncle Ungert, an old loner living in his simple cabin; as well as Assendorff, a stubborn man at war with the entire world (87). This queer, non-biological family becomes the epitome of what the Karelian countryside and its small towns represent in *Träsnidaren och döden*; namely, the region's ability to accept and bring together characters that are deemed as deviant or unfitting by mainstream cultural standards. As the collective we-narrator explains,

Men för människovännen är vår by ett paradis. Vare sig hon är ond eller god, fattig eller rik, blir människan här behandlad inte blott med jämnmod utan med verklig tillgivenhet. Till och med tiggaren kan känna sig som en människa som har något inombords, även om han inte har så mycket i påsen. Den lite rävaktiga nyfikenheten och skvalleraktigheten som man lägger märke till är i grunden av välvillig natur; den gömmer på en andlig tolerans och en glädje vid människan sådan hon är . . . (*Träsnidaren och döden* 87)

But our village is a paradise for someone who loves human beings. No matter whether he is bad or good, poor or rich, a person is treated not only

with equanimity but with genuine affection. Even a beggar can feel like a man who has something of value stored away inside him, even though he doesn't have very much in his bag. The rather sly curiosity and inclination to gossip one can notice here is basically of a benevolent nature; it conceals a spiritual tolerance and a joy at human nature . . . (*Woodcarver and Death* 72)

The we-narrator of the novel repeatedly comments on how their rural town accepts people that have been rejected by the rest of the world, regardless of the town's peripheral location and material poverty. In fact, what the town lacks in material goods, it makes up with the abundance of gossip and stories – practices that, at their core, speak to the spiritual tolerance of the town. Thus, Olsson's novel fulfills what is perhaps the most significant aspect of feminist regionalism; bringing to the spotlight characters that occupy positions which the dominant culture defines as "regional," further associated with "crazy, queer, exotic, or local" (Fetterley and Pryse 37). By depicting the eastern countryside as a location which accepts all kinds of "underliga enslingar" (60; curious recluses) into its stories and communities, Hagar Olsson is able to produce a more inclusive vision of the types of communities the modern world should hold. In such a utopian vision, deviant voices are brought to the center and rural regions are understood as having radical potential for future ways of living.

In this centering of regional or minor characters, the communal voice of "we" becomes a powerful mode of narration. A common thesis in narrative scholarship that deals with experimentally polyphonic and communal voices is that these forms have been employed especially in fiction written by and about minorities or otherwise marginalized

groups of people. For example, Susan S. Lanser notes that “unlike authorial and personal voices, the communal mode seems to be primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities” (*Fictions of Authority* 22). Similarly, Brian Richardson, in his theory of we-narration, suggests that a “substantial number of colonial and postcolonial authors” use the form to express their struggles, while we-narration can also function as a prefiguration of new, more communal societies for groups as diverse as “socialists, feminists, and Third World intellectuals” (46, 56). This idea is not exclusive to communal voices such as we-narrators, but also encompasses other forms of narration that can be characterized as polyphonic. Hertha D. Wong discusses in her analysis of Louise Erdrich’s short stories how many twentieth-century writers, and women writers of color in particular, emphasize multiple narrators, recreate oral narratives for the written page, and thus “maintain community through literary discourse” (184).¹²⁴ According to these theories, such narrative practices have ideological potential, for they may be used to counter various power structures – from the Western novel that has historically been “individualistic and androcentric” (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority* 22), to the “extremes of bourgeois egoism and the poverty of an isolated subjectivity” (Richardson 56), to cite a few.

Even though many scholars have pointed out universal humanity and collectivism as central themes in Olsson’s writing, these topics have not been previously analyzed in

¹²⁴ Wong, furthermore, highlights how a single narrative device can be employed for contradictory purposes. As an example, for many Native American writers, multiple protagonists do not “reflect fragmentation, alienation, or deterioration of an individual voice, as is often suggested by modernist and postmodernist explanations, but the traditional importance of the communal over the individual” (173). Similarly, J. Gerald Kennedy suggests that the genre of the short story sequence produces a different formal interpretation depending on who uses it: “Whereas ethnic and minority sequences often affirm an ongoing sense of community, collections portraying mainstream, middle-class life typically emphasize the precariousness of local attachments” (xiv).

connection to narrative form.¹²⁵ To some extent, a look at the novel's collective narration aligns well with previous interpretations of the text as endorsing a sense of shared humanity and collectivism over individualism. We-narration, with its potential for prefiguring new types of communities, maintaining a collective vision, and pushing back on Western individualism, seems like a fitting narrative choice for the central themes of *Träsnidaren och döden*. On the other hand, a literary form cannot be celebrated as a perfect or straightforward means to a (communal) end. Though Susan S. Lanser discusses the significant ideological potential of communal forms of narration, she also highlights the possible problems inherent to we-narration – which she calls “simultaneous communal narration” – since it is a form that “always risks erasing *difference* beneath presumptions of similarity” (*Fictions of Authority* 261-62). Thus, I want to conclude this section by complicating and pushing back a little on the utopian collective visions that Olsson's narrative performs. What type of universalism does *Träsnidaren och döden* imply, and how does it balance tensions between unity and difference?

Since this project deals heavily with groups that are marginalized by societal structures, such as immigrants as well as racial and ethnic minorities, it is important to note that Olsson's novel presents a different kind of a case study from the previous ones. Despite the author being a part of the Finland-Swedish minority, her novel doesn't explicitly deal with minority issues – even the protagonist is a Finnish (presumably

¹²⁵ When it comes to political interpretations of Hagar Olsson's texts, scholars have often brought out collectivism and universal humanity as central themes in her writing (e.g. Möller-Sibeliuss 240; Meurer-Bongardt, “Dagern låg” 28), and some have seen them as significant features of the Karelian milieu in *Träsnidaren och döden* as well (e.g. Holmström, *Hagar Olsson* 321). According to Ekelund, the Greek-Orthodox Karelia is a symbol of simple piety and human love for Olsson (93). Roger Holmström, quoting Maria Wegelius' research on Olsson's essays, takes this humanity a step further to highlight that Olsson's idea of community is an all-encompassing one that transcends all differences (“Innerlighetens färdvägar” 101).

Finnish-speaking) man migrating to a different part of his own native country. The characters are certainly misfits, but there is a difference between being somehow unfitting or deviant from mainstream cultural standards and being systematically marginalized in society. The novel does bring up classism as an explicit issue, commenting on the poverty of multiple characters and of the rural town, but the narrator remains silent on other aspects of identity that lead to structural marginalization, such as race and ethnicity. Since the only reference to such issues takes place implicitly, through Myyriäinen's ethnic-national understanding of Karelia, the novel remains ambiguous about the types of differences it is ready to tolerate.

To put it crudely; is the community behind the we-narrator an example of Myyriäinen's wish for an original Finnish folk home, and does such a home imply ethnic homogeneity? And if it is not – as the narrator's remarks on the welcoming nature of the village suggest – does the narrator's silence on who belongs to the "us" count as a case of erasing difference?¹²⁶ As much as Olsson's writing has been interpreted to reflect a radical collectivism that crosses all differences, I would venture to say that *Träsnidaren och döden* leaves open the question of whether its utopian collectivity is actually only a feel-good, liberal and color-blind one, where differences are transcended by being ignored and erased, or whether it is a truly intersectional one where – as Audre Lorde famously put it – difference is explicitly acknowledged and embraced.

Perhaps these are not fair questions to be asked from a 1940s Finland-Swedish text, and perhaps they miss the point of Olsson's novel. In her comprehensive study of utopian features in Olsson's writing from the interwar period, Judith Meurer-Bongardt

¹²⁶ The fact that the rural characters' names stem from very different linguistic (and national) roots would also suggest that Myyriäinen's Karelia is a multilingual and -cultural place, rather than a homogenous one.

argues that ambiguity is a part of Olsson's textual and political strategy. For Olsson, literature plays a significant role in creating a better future, but instead of explicitly depicting how a new society will and should look like, her writing leaves room for different kinds of utopian thought experiments (Meurer-Bongardt, "Dagern låg" 14).¹²⁷ Such utopianism – which is based on a longing for a more humane and just world – can be seen as central to Olsson's *nyrealist* (new-realist) literary strategy in the years leading to the Second World War (Meurer-Bongardt, *Wo Atlantis*).

Träsnidaren och döden could be read as such a utopian thought experiment, as well – an experiment where Karelia, one of the most nationalistically loaded regions of Finland, is reemployed to make a case for universal belonging and communal feeling. Indeed, I would argue that the Karelia Myyriäinen encounters – despite nostalgic associations to his childhood – is future-oriented and presents unconventional ideas of what communities and kinship may look like in the future.¹²⁸ After all, Myyriäinen abandons his biological family in order to start a new, queer community that crosses all aspects of identity. In our present-day reality, humanism alone cannot exceed structural differences, but the point of *Träsnidaren och döden* is to provide visions of alternative futures, rather than deconstruct contemporary structures. Much of its revolutionary

¹²⁷ According to Meurer-Bongardt, Olsson's understanding of the utopian potential of literature bears strong resemblance to Ernst Bloch's idea of utopia not as a specific literary genre but, rather, as a function that can be found in all types of texts as an aesthetic *Vor-Schein* (fore-gleam). *Vor-Schein* is a type of anticipatory, utopian illumination for Bloch and Olsson (Meurer-Bongardt, *Wo Atlantis* 14-15).

¹²⁸ Meurer-Bongardt has pointed out a similar idea in relation to Olsson's utopia in her earlier works; Olsson is not simply longing for a lost time but, rather, takes advantage of the past and its traditions to reveal hidden utopian possibilities for the future (Meurer-Bongardt, *Wo Atlantis*, 495, 500). An interesting comparison with Olsson's feminist regionalism and utopia can be found in Agnes von Krusenstjerna's novels, which also contrast the countryside with the city and use a rural milieu not simply as a nostalgic retro utopia but as a means to construct visions of a new human (Paqvalén, *Kampen om Eros* 59-63, 296-98).

potential lies in the act of imagining a case of collective agency and storytelling. When analyzed through its narrative structure, the novel can be read as a meta-commentary on the importance of art and storytelling in bringing people together. In Olsson's novel, we-narration does not attempt to maintain an existing community, but rather to imagine a completely new one – and in this utopian vision, rural Karelia as a welcoming borderland has a significant role to play.

4.4. NORDIC (AND AMERICAN) REGIONAL MODERNISMS: A COMPARATIVE LOOK

To my knowledge, regional modernism has not been established as a theoretical field within Finnish scholarship, especially in the feminist, critical sense of the term. Pertti Karkama has used the concept “maaseutumodernismi” (countryside modernism) when describing authors such as Arvid Järnefelt and F.E. Sillanpää, whose texts portray characters transitioning from the countryside into urban living conditions (175-91). Karkama, however, sees his case studies as a mix of realism and modernism (176) and implies that countryside modernism is only a precursor to true modernism (191).

Alternatively, H. K. Riikonen has pointed out how it was precisely texts dealing with rural locations that made the few early exceptions to the otherwise belated nature of Finnish-language modernism. For example, Joel Lehtonen's novel *Putkinotko* (1919-20) portrays life on the countryside during a single summer day, while Volter Kilpi's *Saaristosarja* (1933-37, *Archipelago Series*) focuses on countryside people on the Western coast of Finland. The most famous novel in the *Archipelago Series*, titled *Alastalon salissa* (1933, *In the Parlour of Alastalo*), is temporally experimental to an extreme, as it describes “in 800 pages a sixhour long negotiation about the founding of a

company for constructing a sailing vessel” (Riikonen 849). In Riikonen’s view, these examples are Finnish equivalents to true modernist authors such as James Joyce or Marcel Proust (849), but he does not take his argument further to establish a rural or regional modernism in Finland based on such cases.

Whereas Karkama’s “countryside modernism” emphasizes the countryside as a literary milieu and highlights the theme of urbanization, the feminist understanding of regional modernism that I employ here entails instead a theoretical approach that attempts to uncover texts that deal with political critiques, marginal voices, and peripheral locations (such as the countryside). Instead of grouping texts together based on a specific geographical region – what does literary Karelia or Karelian literature look like? – feminist regionalism shifts the focus into analyzing how texts from various marginal regions discuss power relations within modernity. Thus, it allows for a new type of comparative approach to representations of the countryside.

John N. Duvall, who has examined Fetterley and Pryse’s approach in connection to American modernist studies, writes that their work is particularly useful in negotiating the relations between regionalism and modernism. Defining regionalism as a form of *minor literature* in which everything is political allows “regionalist readings to cross geographical boundaries so as to underscore resonances between writers typically contextualized within their particular region” (Duvall 245).¹²⁹ Consequently, this new,

¹²⁹ Duvall is not the first to use the concept of “minor literature” when discussing the political nature of modernist texts. Previously, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari coined the term to describe the literature of a minority writing in a major language, and the collective and political nature of such literature (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*). As Julia Tidigs explains, “For Deleuze and Guattari, the word minor has a multiplicity of meanings in this context. It describes the literature of a minority writing in a major language, such as German speaking Jews in Prague or speakers of Swedish in Finland. Minor here means not only small in terms of numbers or range of territory. It also means ‘underaged’: not being the one who sets the (language) rules. Minor

critical definition of regionalism is somewhat analogical with geomodernism, which proposes a transnational yet local approach for studying different modernisms' relations to the political and cultural discourses of modernity (Doyle and Winkiel 3; Thomsen, "Geomodernism and Affect").

Even though Duvall refers to authors from different regions within the United States, what I have hoped to argue throughout this project is that the same logic can be applied – in the spirit of geomodernism – to a consideration of regional writings across national and linguistic borders. The point of the last two sections of this chapter is to conclude my arguments regarding transnational, feminist regionalism by crossing national and linguistic borders one final time. I will do this by placing side by side additional Nordic and American rural texts typically not associated with one another. My hope is to both showcase the multiplicity of countryside representations within Nordic modernisms and, consequently, to demonstrate how regionalism can function as a lens for transnational scholarship. While plenty of comparative research has been done within the Finland-Swedish minority and their literary handling of place and space (Ekelund; Ekman; Holmström, *Att ge röst*), regional comparisons between texts from different linguistic and geographical backgrounds in the Nordic region are less common. Therefore, instead of comparing Olsson's novel to its more typical peers, such as Edith

literature is characterized both by a coefficient of deterritorialization (i.e. a centrifugal, anti-structuralizing tendency) and by its collective and political nature" ("Here I am at home" 366). Tidigs has used Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "minor literature" in the Finland-Swedish context to analyze the political multilingualism in Elmer Diktonius's modernist texts ("Here I am at home" 366; *Att skriva sig* 256). In the field of feminist regionalism, however, "minor" has referred not so much to linguistic questions as to minor *geographical locations* and *genres* which the mainstream culture defines as regional, further associated with peripheral, deviant, and negligible. By means of their regional status, such locations enable a political critique of the mainstream.

Södergran's poems featuring Karelia, I will expand my analysis here from the Finland-Swedish minority and its representations of Karelia to a look at various portrayals of the countryside in Finland and Sweden, with additional points of comparison from American regionalism. My main case studies in this section are Elin Wägner's *Norr tullsligan* (1908, *Norr tullsliga*) and Eyvind Johnson's *Stad i mörker* (1927, *City in Darkness*) from Sweden, Marja-Liisa Vartio's *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* (1960, *All Women Dream*) from Finland, as well as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) from the United States.¹³⁰

In opposition to Olsson's *Träsnidaren och döden* – that focuses on Karelia as a specific rural location with distinct, utopian possibilities – my other Nordic case studies depict more generic countryside locations in Finland and Sweden. In these generic rural regions, two different interpretations or schools of thinking emerge. Firstly, the Nordic countryside as a negative other; that which has been left behind modernity and, consequently, causes major struggles for its inhabitants. In this interpretation, representations of peripheral locations can function as a dark metaphor for the backward

¹³⁰ This is obviously not an exhaustive list of Finnish and Swedish – let alone Nordic – modernist texts that deal with the issue of rural regions. I chose Johnson's, Wägner's, and Vartio's novels for the present study to both showcase the temporal and ideological range of regionalism in the Nordic countries, and to highlight how only some rural texts fit the definition of "feminist" regionalism as political and counterhegemonic writing. Further research could provide an even fuller account of the timeline of Nordic modernist regionalism, taking into consideration for example the authors that Riikonen and Lisi have brought up, such as Volter Kilpi, Joel Lehtonen, and Knut Hamsun. In addition to texts set entirely in the countryside, the theme of migrating between the country and the city was picked up by many Nordic modernist authors. In Moa Martinson's proletarian-modernist classic, *Kvinnor och Äppelträd* (1933, *Women and Apple Trees*) the two female protagonists, Sally and Ellen, move between the countryside and the city several times, both eventually settling in the country. Marja-Liisa Vartio's female protagonist in *Se on sitten kevät* (1957, *It is Spring Then*) lives and works on the countryside, yet occasionally travels to the city in an attempt to connect with her estranged daughter. Moreover, the theme of Karelia migrated from Finland-Swedish modernism all the way to Sweden; Harry Martinson's modernist space travel epic *Aniara* (1956) features one poem dedicated to the lost rural region of Karelia. These are but a few of the works that further research on regional modernism might address.

state of the entire country. Thus, associations are made between the urban, the modern, and the rest of the world on the one hand, and the rural, the backward, and – as in the case of Eyvind Johnson's *Stad i mörker* – the Swedish nation, on the other. In addition to Johnson's novel, Sherwood Anderson's and Sinclair Lewis's texts across the Atlantic can be grouped into this rather pessimistic and limited understanding of the countryside.

Secondly, the Nordic countryside has been represented as a more or less abstractly longed for alternative to city-dwelling; as a daydreamed location that is employed to provide a feminist means for critiquing the uneven development of modernization and urbanization. Texts such as Elin Wägner's *Norrtullsligan* and Marja-Liisa Vartio's *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* fall under this category, while Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* also features aspects of intersectional critique despite its otherwise negative handling of the countryside. In what follows, I will analyze both of these groups in order to further argue that the countryside has been employed for different, often gendered political means in the regional modernisms of the Nordic countries and the United States.

Eyvind Johnson's *Stad i mörker* is a case in point of the first of these categories. It is a modernist novel exclusively located in an unnamed, small rural town in Norrland, the northernmost part of Sweden. Many of the novel's characters consider their rural location's insignificance in relation to the rest of the world:

Det är stort, Europa, tycker urmakarn. Han har just inte tänkt på det förut. Tyskland, Frankrike, England, ett stycke Skandinavien, ett stycke Ryssland. Och gränserna förändras då och då; ljudlöst, nästan omärkligt på kartan, med buller och bråk där ute. Där ute –? . . . Långt uppe en liten prick, en liten stad. Hammar upptäcker att den verkligen hör till Europa, är

en punkt i världen, ett litet centra, kring vilket en landsbygd sluter sig – en kärna. . . . Det är litet. Han måste erkänna, att det är försvinnande.

Stockholm är en helt annan sak, men detta är för litet. (Johnson 132-33)

It is big, Europe, ponders the watchmaker. He hasn't happened to think about it before. Germany, France, England, a bit of Scandinavia, a bit of Russia. And the borders change every now and then, silently, nearly inconspicuously on the map, but with clamor and quarrel out there. Out there –? . . . High up a little dot, a little city. Hammar realizes that it does, in fact, belong to Europe, it is a point in the world, a little center, around which the countryside closes itself – a core . . . It is little. He has to admit that it is negligible. Stockholm is another matter, but this here is too little.

In Johnson's novel, the peripheral location of a rural small town becomes the depressing outcast space of a globalizing and modernizing world. As Hammar the watchmaker contemplates whilst looking at a world map in the above quotation, not only is his hometown far away from the urbanity of Stockholm, but it becomes even tinier, and more meaningless in the context of Europe and the entire globe. Like many other characters in Johnson's novel, Hammar is confused by the disconnection between the small town and the outside world. Although the town can be seen as the "kärna" (core) of the rural area surrounding it, it is simply too small and peripheral – even ephemeral – in comparison to the real centers of the globe. This peripheral location is further associated with an absence of life, both in terms of nature and in terms of the town's inhabitants:

Detta är i en liten stad med lång vinter. Livet fryser fast, utvecklingen stannar, människorna trängas samman av kölden, den andliga fattigdomen,

vinterns trötthet och skumhet. . . . Små ting bli stora, och stora ting finnas inte; vintern är ett helvete, trots alla vackra ord om den. . . . och de andra driva frusna ned mot järnvägsstationen. Där händer heller ingenting. . . . Man väntar tåget, alldeles som om det skulle ha något med sig, och när det kommit är ingenting mer att vänta. . . . Staden är tom, tillvaron är tom, det är februari och termometern sjunker fortfarande – (Johnson 84)

This takes place in a small city with long winters. Life freezes solid, development halts, people are cramped by the cold weather, spiritual poverty, winter's fatigue and darkness . . . Small things become big, and big things don't exist at all; winter is hell, despite all the beautiful words about it . . . and the other [boys] drift, ice cold, down to the train station. Nothing happens there either . . . One waits for the train, as if it would bring something with it, and once it has arrived there is nothing more to wait for . . . The city is empty, life is empty, it is February and the thermometer continues to plunge –

Februari är en månad, som bromsar tiden, en kloss under vagnshjulen, en press, som trycker samman och gör mindre och fattigare. (Johnson 79)

February is a month that puts the brakes on time, a block in the wagon wheels, a clamp that presses down and makes one smaller and poorer.

Throughout *Stad i mörker*, both the heterodiegetic narrator and the various characters of the rural small town in Sweden contemplate the stillness, boredom, and lack of life in the provincial town, which becomes strongly associated with cold winters and particularly the month of February. The narrator denies any pastoral images and beautiful

words about the Nordic winter and, instead, describes it as hell where all development has stopped. The narrative style of repeating words (“Staden är tom, tillvaron är tom”; The city is empty, life is empty) and expressing events in a list-like manner create a sense of life going on in an endless cycle, instead of moving forward. The only point of movement in the rural location is the train station toward which some of the main characters wander to witness the trains come and go. Yet, even the train, an emblem of modernity, progress, and movement brings nothing real to the town. Furthermore, the trains do not take any of the central characters away from the countryside. The characters in *Stad i mörker* are, for the most part, distraught, depressed, suspicious of one another, and resentful towards their surroundings – and yet, none of them are able to leave the town during the course of the novel.

While the characters of the novel often focus their angst towards the city itself, the narrator seems to blame the town’s backwardness on the winter weather.¹³¹ It is the never-ending February that comes to represent all that which is wrong in rural northern Sweden. February, with its endless darkness and chilling temperatures, is the “kloss under vagnshjulen” (block in the wagon wheels) that prevents progress and movement. Whether we see the conditions of the town as a result of natural elements or the actions of its citizens, what is significant here is the way in which this specific rural site represents metonymically Sweden as a whole. Since the location is referred to as a nameless and generic small town by its inhabitants and the narrator, its exact location is hidden,

¹³¹ This is most apparent in the consciousness representation of the two male protagonists: watchmaker Hammar and teacher Andersson. However, other minor characters contemplate the nothingness of the rural town as well. For example, little boy Nisse compares the rural streets to other locations which he has read about in the newspapers but never seen in reality: “But nearly nothing happens here. Perhaps elsewhere: one gets to read about it in the newspaper, but never see for one’s self.” In the original Swedish: ”Det händer ju så litet. Kanske på andra håll: det man läser om i tidningen, men aldrig får se” (Johnson 163-64).

consequently turning it into a representation of any similar Swedish site. The problems portrayed here are the problems of rural Sweden, and as one of the main characters notes towards the end of the novel, “detta land är inte för människor” (253, This country is not for people [to live in]).¹³²

Yet, the rural town is not completely disconnected from the modern world. There are specific markers such as maps, newspapers, and telephone calls that come to represent the rest of the world, functioning as mediators between the modern parts of the globe and the backward countryside town. One of these is the town’s local newspaper office and its constantly ringing phone, described in the “Mellanspel” (Interlude) chapter of the novel. As the town’s journalist, Alex C. Petterson, attempts to piece together reports for the daily newspaper, the office phone repeatedly interrupts him to bring news from Stockholm and other faraway urban centers:

Rrrrr rrrr rr rrr rr -- rr -- -- -- Du talar om, att Italiens diktator sagt något den nionde februari. Stora män i England böra övertänka vissa saker . . .
Kina fortfarande i oro...Rrrr. Stockholm den nionde. (Johnson 116)

Rrrrr rrrr rr rrr rr -- rr -- -- -- You’re saying that the dictator of Italy said something on the ninth of February. Important men in England should

¹³² For an insightful interpretation of the novel that differs from the one I present here, see Bjarne Thorup Thomsen’s “Marginal and Metropolitan Modernist Modes in Eyvind Johnson’s Early Urban Narratives” and “Geomodernism and Affect in Eyvind Johnson’s Urban North: Reflections on *Stad i mörker* and related novel-, travel- and memory-writing.” Despite discussing Eyvind Johnson’s novel from a similar vantage point of geomodernism and northern peripheries, Thomsen employs a distinctly urban focus. As the titles of his articles indicate, Thomsen defines the landscapes of Johnson’s texts not as rural locations, but as “modern town- and cityscapes” and as “marginal urban setting[s]” (“Marginal and Metropolitan” 62-63). Such a definition continues the privileging of urban areas in modernist scholarship, and I would suggest that Johnson’s setting is meant to emphasize its regionality and rural nature as something different from – and even alternative to – urban living.

consider certain things . . . Continuing restlessness in China...Rrrr.
Stockholm on the ninth.

The global news is so overwhelming that it nearly prevents Alex from finishing a piece of local news about the death of Elisabeth Ågren, one of the town's citizens. In addition to marking the news from Stockholm as more urgent in comparison to events in the rural town, the phone calls also evoke an opposition between Sweden and the rest of the world by demonstrating how much more happens in the faraway locations of England, Italy, and China. This constitutes a unidirectional power imbalance between the various locations. Furthermore, the "Interlude" chapter connects modernity with *modernism*: out of all the chapters in Johnson's novel, it is the most formally experimental and innovative one. Instead of having a clear plotline, "Interlude" breaks into a stream-of-consciousness poetic description of broken sentences that are constantly interrupted with the onomatopoeic sounds of the phone. Thus, modernism as a literary style takes over most explicitly as the theme of modernity becomes the focus of the narrative.

What *Stad i mörker* shows is how information and people are able to travel from the centers of the world to even the most rural and northern peripheries. The Swedish small town is not portrayed as a completely disconnected society; rather, its dark atmosphere comes from the power imbalance between said centers and peripheries. Movement only flows one way, since nothing and no one is able to leave or escape the rural. A fitting example of this is the train station which, despite connecting the town to other parts of the country, does not represent a chance for anyone to get out. Teacher Andersson, one of the central characters of the novel, is constantly blaming himself for

the meaningless state of his life, dreaming of leaving the town and becoming a sailor, yet is never able to actualize these desires. He often wanders to a corner of the train station to witness it momentarily become full of vibrant life, laughter, and buzz as a train arrives, only to leave silence and death – and Andersson himself – behind as it departs:

Ett tåg dånar där ute i rälsen . . . Perrongen fylls av liv, myllrande liv, rop, skratt, skrap och oväsen, och så slås dörrarna till väntsalen upp, och in vältrar en brådslande massa . . . och sedan rullar tåget vidare ut i mörkret. Livet i väntsalen domnar åter. Dörrarna smälla igen, ropen och skratten försvinna genom dem, dö, finnas icke mer . . . Och i ett hörn står skollärar Andersson och läser tidtabellen. (Johnson 59-60)

A train rumbles outside on the tracks . . . The platform fills with life, roaring life, shouts, laughter, trash and commotion, and then the doors to the waiting area fly open with a bang, and a hurrying crowd rushes in . . . and then the train rolls on into the darkness. Life in the waiting room quiets down again. The doors slam closed again, shouts and laughter disappearing through them, dying, no longer existing . . . And in a corner stands schoolteacher Andersson reading the timetable.

The modern world is present in the small town for its inhabitants, yet it is only there to be dreamed of and heard about through phone calls and newspapers or gazed at in the form of passing trains. Johnson's novel, as an example of Nordic modernism, addresses globalization and cosmopolitanism, yet shows how access to such phenomena is not available to the trapped characters of the town except in the form of dreams. In fact, the only way to escape the periphery is through death. Multiple of the novel's central

characters die, from the politically active post office worker Elisabeth Ågren to watchmaker Hammar's young son Sture.

It is particularly the theme of death that turns Johnson's vision of the countryside a dark one and, consequently, the novel becomes reminiscent of the American revolt from the village tradition of the early twentieth century. As we have seen, revolt authors such as Sherwood Anderson turned to highlight and criticize what they saw as the problematic aspects of small town culture in modernizing America (Poll 39). In fact, *Stad i mörker* shares major similarities with Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. In both novels, the characters of a rural small town lack authentic community and connection with one another, while hopes of leaving the town are placed on a young, prominent male character. Whereas *Winesburg, Ohio's* young reporter, George Willard, achieves the dream of escaping the rural periphery, Johnson's novel ends with a darker scene of northern masculinity: a day before his departure for a cosmopolitan education abroad, young man Sture gets intoxicated and violent and drowns in a frozen lake.

A slightly different example of the revolt from the village tradition is Sinclair Lewis's bestseller *Main Street*, which coined the term "village virus" to describe people who move into small towns, lose ambition, and end up staying in a life of drudgery, conservatism, and conformity. Lewis's text resembles Johnson's *Stad i mörker* in many ways; both novels bring out the effects of dark, cold winters on small town inhabitants and discuss how conservative and absurd local politics can become in rural settings. The latter is exemplified in both novels via younger female characters – Carol in *Main Street* and Elizabeth in *Stad i mörker* – who attempt to bring change and reform to their small towns with little success. Lewis's novel, situated in the fictional town of Gopher Prairie,

Minnesota, even has a strong Nordic connection; the outskirts of the town are populated by Swedish and Norwegian farmers and handymen. What sets Lewis's text apart from Johnson and Anderson, however, is its intersectional lens directed at rural regions. Through its female protagonist, Carol, *Main Street* focuses on the limits that small towns pose on younger women, and it highlights how the conformist nature of rural towns hits people who are already marginalized by gender, ethnicity, and class particularly hard.

A striking and telling point of comparison between Johnson's and Lewis's novels in this manner is how they both emphasize the role of train stations in the life of rural small towns. Like Johnson in *Stad i mörker*, so does Lewis in *Main Street* illustrate how trains are an emblem of the wider world and a means to momentarily escape the lifelessness of the town:

Trains! At the lake cottage she [Carol] missed the passing of the trains. She realized that in town she had depended upon them for assurance that there remained a world beyond. The railroad was more than a means of transportation to Gopher Prairie. It was a new god; a monster of steel limbs, oak ribs, flesh of gravel, and a stupendous hunger for freight . . . Even in this new era of motors the citizens went down to the station to see the trains go through. It was their romance; their only mystery besides mass at the Catholic Church; and from the trains came lords of the outer world—traveling salesmen with piping on their waistcoats, and visiting cousins from Milwaukee. (Lewis 125)

The railroad, a symbol of industrialized modernity, becomes a monstrous god-like creature to the citizens of Gopher Prairie and offers an alternative, secular source of

wonder to the mysteries of religion and church. Moreover, what makes the passing trains a symbol of hope are the people and influences they bring from “the outer world”; a reminder that there exists a world beyond the limits of the town. Although both Lewis’s protagonist, Carol, and Johnson’s teacher Anderson find hope in the passing trains, Lewis goes further to reveal the discriminating side of the small town’s relation with the train station. Namely, Gopher Prairie’s population takes pleasure in watching outcast members of the town leave for good by train. This is the case for young teacher Fern, who is falsely accused of drinking and behaving irresponsibly with men, as well as for Swedish handyman Miles, who is condemned as a socialist troublemaker:

Carol went with her [Fern] to the train. The two girls elbowed through a silent lip-licking crowd. Carol tried to stare them down but in face of the impishness of the boys and the bovine gaping of the men, she was embarrassed. . . . Carol remembered that Miles Bjornstam had also taken a train. What would be the scene at the station when she herself took departure? (Lewis 207)

Departing by train is a final form of public humiliation for characters who are judged as too reformist, radical, socialist, democratic, independent, or rule-breaking in Gopher Prairie. Worse still, the narrator of *Main Street* reveals that typically these judgments are circulated through false gossip that permeates the town and forces everyone to conform and act in a conservative manner. In *Main Street*, rural small towns are portrayed as suffocating because they prevent any form of true diversity of people or thought. Inhabitants who occupy marginal positions in town – either by their class, ethnicity, or gender – threaten the town’s conservative and catholic status quo and are

consequently pressured into leaving. Thus, the railroad acts not only as a carrier of modern influences into town but also as a way to bid farewell to unwanted developments.

In comparison to Lewis's intersectional account, the dark depiction of the countryside that characterizes the majority of Johnson's novel reveals a more conventionally gendered understanding of regions. Namely, even though the rural site is portrayed as a stifling place for all townspeople, only the men of the Swedish town are represented as having either the option or the desire to leave. Whereas the female characters are held fixed in their roles and homes, young men such as Sture are understood to be destined to leave the rural and escape to urban modernity. Thus, *Stad i mörker* perpetuates the double standard of modernization; one that is not only a matter of location (being imprisoned in a rural region), but of gender, as well (being imprisoned in the periphery as a woman). Perhaps Johnson's novel – similarly to many American revolt from the village texts – has such a strong resentment towards rural regions because they are seen as preventing male characters from pursuing what is, traditionally, a very masculine dream of going out to explore the world.¹³³ As such, regional texts like Johnson's should be further analyzed in comparison to novels with more intersectional discussions of rural locations and their effects on characters' identities.

This brings me to the second category of Nordic regional modernisms I outlined previously: namely, novels that use the countryside in order to produce feminist and

¹³³ Dr. Archie in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* is a very similar masculine figure to Johnson's protagonists. Like schoolteacher Andersson, Dr. Archie judges the small town of Moonstone as the end of the run: "The railroad is the one real fact in this country. That has to be; the world has to be got back and forth. But the rest of us are here just because it's the end of a run and the engine has to have a drink" (81). Interestingly, Cather reverses the idea of the male protagonist leaving the countryside for the urban world, and centers her story instead on Thea, whom the male characters of Moonstone support in order to see her leave and succeed on their behalf.

political critiques of the developments of modernity, and consequently better fit the idea of Fetterley and Pryse's regionalism. For example, Swedish author Elin Wägner's *Norrullsligan* counters the idea that the urban can automatically be equated with freedom and happiness that are unattainable in a backward countryside. Wägner's novel, published two decades prior to Johnson's *Stad i mörker*, includes both gender and class as determining factors of what it means to live in specific locations of Sweden, and reveals how modern city life and its urban workspaces can be physically and emotionally detrimental to working-class women. The novel focuses on a group of young women working and suffering in the capital of Sweden, until the protagonist leaves the urban space for a happier life in the very end of the novel. For the majority of the text, the romanticized idea of the modern metropolis tempts the women to stay in Stockholm, despite their horrid living circumstances:

Sådana är vi ju allesamman, sade Eva. Vi talar ofta illa om Stockholm, och det kan vi ha orsak till, men vi älskar stan med en hopplös och outrotlig kärlek. Vi får så litet med av allt det vackra och glada och upplyftande den har att bjuda på, vad vi får känna mest av är gatmodden och skatterna och de dyra hyrorna . . . Här kan ju i alla fall allting hända. (Wägner 75-76)

“We’re all like that,” said Eva. “We often disparage Stockholm, and with good reason, but we love the city with a hopeless and undying love. We see so little of all the beautiful and happy and uplifting things it has to offer—what we mostly experience is the slush on the streets and the taxes

and the high rents . . . At any rate, here anything and everything can happen. (Loc. 1012)¹³⁴

What keeps the female protagonists in Sweden's capital is the modern dream of the city as a site where “*kan ju i alla fall allting hända*” (at any rate, anything and everything can happen). In his discussion of literary depictions of early twentieth century Helsinki, Lieven Ameel points out how characters can feel affection and attachment to the city, even if the city simultaneously creates dystopian or pessimistic experiences for them (236). Furthermore, Ameel discusses how gender and class affect the experiencing of Helsinki; female characters may face sexual harassment and abuse in the cityscape, while lower class inhabitants need to clumsily move around Helsinki while facing downward social trajectories (280-81). Wägner's novel, set in Stockholm, on the other side of the Baltic Sea, brings out similar feelings of attachment *and* realization of the hardships that the urban space poses on lower-class women. Though some of the female characters continue to be fascinated by Stockholm, the novel highlights how a move from the countryside to an urban location does not necessarily lead to economic, social, or cultural upward mobility. For a working woman, most of the upper-class secrets of Stockholm remain out of reach. Novels such as Wägner's show the chasm between utopian fantasies of modern city-life and the realities of such locations for working women, thus questioning the critical attitude towards the countryside that texts such as Johnson's *Stad i mörker* depict.

¹³⁴ The English translation from Wägner's *Norrullsligan* is by Betty Cain and Ulla Sweedler, who have published a translation of Wägner's two novels under the title *Stockholm Stories: Men and Other Misfortunes & Stormy Corner*.

A final example and point of contrast I want to examine in this section is Marja-Liisa Vartio's novel *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* which, somewhat similarly to Wägner's novel, uses a contrast between urban and rural areas as a means for intersectional critique. Vartio's novel also serves chronologically as the last example of regional modernism in my dissertation. Published in 1960, the text brings out how slow of a process urbanization was in Finland, while the countryside continued to have an important role well into the latter half of the twentieth century. The time difference between my Nordic case studies also raises the question of how ideas about the countryside's role in modernity have changed or remained the same during the decades between 1908 and 1960. In opposition to the idea of the generic Nordic countryside as a dark, suffocating, and literally deathly space, as depicted in *Stad i mörker*, Vartio's novel comes somewhat closer to Hagar Olsson's positive depictions of rural locations in *Träsnidaren och döden*. However, despite the fact that both Vartio and Olsson connect rural regions with childhood memories and a longing for home, their accounts of the countryside remain quite distinct from one another.

The protagonist of *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia*, Mrs. Pyy, is an urbanized woman who grew up on the Finnish countryside and often thinks back to her early years:

Mutta kun hän muisti, hänelle tuli ikävä, kuin juuret, jotka hän oli luullut katkaisseensa, olisivat huutaneet häntä takaisin sinne, mistä oli lähtenyt. Eikä hän silti voisi mennä siellä käymään, ei enää edes ajatuksessa kulkea niitä teitä pitkin! (Vartio 198)

But when she remembered, she started to feel longing, as if the roots that she thought she had cut off had called for her to return to where she had

started from. And still, she couldn't go back there to visit, not even in her thoughts could she wander along those roads!

Like Myyriäinen in *Träsnidaren och döden*, Mrs. Pyy in Vartio's novel also fondly reminisces her countryside roots and rural childhood home. The novel starts off as Mrs. Pyy, a middle-aged housewife, moves to a new row house in Helsinki with her husband and children, and the text follows her feelings of entrapment in the role of a housewife and in the social circles of Finland's capital. Even though Mrs. Pyy's consciousness representation in the above quotation claims that she can no longer walk along the roads of her rural home village even via her thoughts and imagination, her mind does regularly escape back into the farm where she grew up. However, unlike in the case of Myyriäinen, Mrs. Pyy's longing remains on the level of dreaming and is never concretized or fulfilled. Nearly the entire novel is set in Helsinki and its suburbs, while the only travels to the countryside take place virtually in the dreams, memories, and imagination of Mrs. Pyy.

Memories of the countryside emerge in peak narrative moments of the novel, whenever Mrs. Pyy experiences something particularly significant in her urban milieu. These moments – such as reuniting with a childhood friend (Vartio 86-89), meeting her secret lover (131), losing her dreamed-of suburban home (193-194), and seeing a famous painting in Rome (294) – pave way to narrative interruptions ranging in length from a few sentences to a few pages. In such interruptions, the narration follows Mrs. Pyy into her rural memories, and thus the novel shifts both temporally and spatially from the moment of telling to long-gone locations and familiar characters of Mrs. Pyy's childhood. Additionally, these memories are often associated with (childhood) play, for example

when Mrs. Pyy arrives in the kitchen of her secret lover: “kun hän oli työntänyt ovea ja nähnyt hellan . . . niin hänestä oli tuntunut että hän oli palannut lapsuutensa leikkimökkiin, jossa keitettiin kahvi ja tehtiin ruokaa. Entäpä jos menisin ja sanoisin, etten halua enää leikkiä” (131).¹³⁵ Via a memory of her childhood sites, even the present moment in the city becomes associated with play and acting. Mrs. Pyy has for quite some time performed the role of a house-keeping wife in her lover’s house, often cooking and cleaning for him, but now she no longer wants to play-act her role as someone else’s wife and adulteress.

In addition to memories, significant experiences in the city cause Mrs. Pyy to imagine completely made-up scenes and visions of the countryside. After Mrs. Pyy has bid farewell to her childhood friend Laura, she stops to ponder on an unknown “emäntä” (the female head of a farm) she sees at the train station, and begins to adopt the farm woman’s point of view and to narrativize the stranger’s life: “Hän oli näkevinään emännän tulevan kotiinsa, maalaistaloon, ja ottavan siellä hatun päästään . . . Hiljaisuus, pimeys, emäntä käveli navettaan ja aukaisi oven ja lehmien ääntely kuului pimeästä” (98).¹³⁶ Immediately afterwards, Mrs. Pyy fantasizes about the view from Laura’s farmhouse window and compares this imagined scenery – with its fields, forest, and “emäntä” – to her own laconic row house in Helsinki. In contrast to the idyllic countryside scenery, Mrs. Pyy’s suburban window shows only “kadun toisella puolen

¹³⁵ “Once she had pushed the door open and seen the stove . . . she felt as if she had returned to the playhouse of her childhood, where coffee was made and food prepared. What if I went and said that I no longer wanted to play.”

¹³⁶ “She [Mrs. Pyy] imagined she saw the farm woman [*emäntä*] arrive at her home, a farm house, and take her hat off . . . Silence, darkness, the matron walked into the cowshed and opened the door and the noises of the cows were heard from the darkness.”

samanlaisen talon, samanlaisen ikkunan” (100).¹³⁷ Similarly to how Helga Crane takes narrative agency in *Quicksand*, Mrs. Pyy, too, enjoys imagining and storying all sorts of scenes for herself. Through actual memories and made-up images of the countryside, Mrs. Pyy is able to gain narrative authority in a life where she otherwise has only the restricted resources and opportunities of a housewife.

At the same time, these visions of the countryside strengthen the opposition between rural and urban areas in the novel. Towards the end of *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia*, even Mrs. Pyy’s husband begins to comment on the “maahenki” (209, rural spirit) of his wife and how she is drifting apart from her city children due to her excessively rural manners and speech (224).¹³⁸ The more the family’s (financial) situation in Helsinki worsens, the more rural Mrs. Pyy seems to become. In the end, her husband accuses her of increasingly adopting a rural language register, as well: “Ja oletko huomannut että sinä olet viime aikoina alkanut puhua jopa kotipuolesi kieltä . . . sinä puhut leveästi ja isotellen kuin et olisi helsinkiläisrouva vaan aina vain ison talon tytär, emäntä pöydän päässä” (234).¹³⁹ Mrs. Pyy, instead of successfully turning into a “helsinkiläisrouva” (Helsinki madam), regresses into the habits of a countryside “emäntä” (farm woman).

Regional literature often features a motif of migration between cities and the countryside, and in the Nordic texts I have treated thus far, such movements between

¹³⁷ “across the street another house just like this one, another window just like this one.”

¹³⁸ In this sense, Mrs. Pyy’s situation with her children comes close to the mother-daughter relationship in Vartio’s earlier novel *Se on sitten kevät* (1957, *It is spring then*). This novel, almost exclusively situated in a farm house, portrays the life of farm maid Anni who occasionally travels to the city to meet her daughter, whose urban life and lifestyle have become completely foreign to her.

¹³⁹ “[Mr. Pyy to Mrs. Pyy:] And have you noticed that lately you have even begun to speak the language of your home parish . . . you speak broadly and you talk big as if you weren’t a Helsinki madam but always just the daughter of a big [farm] house, a matron at the end of the table.”

urban centers and peripheral rural towns can be interpreted to reflect the status of the Nordic countries as peripheries of the world map. Consequently, the periphery comes into play in two ways in these texts; it not only refers to the countryside milieu of the novels, but also to the peripheral role that places like Sweden and Finland have had because of their geographical location. As we have seen in Johnson's *Stad i mörker*, multiple of the novel's characters see the rural town as a suffocating and tragic place, but their wish to leave the small town also expands into a hope of leaving *Sweden* and its peripheral status behind. Marja-Liisa Vartio, on the other hand, highlights how urban migration as an experience is dependent on the gender and class of the person migrating (cf. Ameen 173-75).

At the same time, both Vartio's and Olsson's novels question the suffocating and secondary nature of the countryside in relation to urban living. For example, in *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia*, the protagonist's mostly positive memories regarding the countryside – which offer relief from her disillusionment with urban life – emphasize how urban migration does not always entail access to the development and benefits of the modernizing world. Both the novel and Mrs. Pyy's consciousness representation are dominated by the bleakness of urban row house living, a constant lack of money, and a longing to get closer to nature. Thus, Vartio's text provides a critical view of the wonders of urbanization and a cosmopolitan lifestyle by revealing such wishes as illusory in the face of material reality. Like Wägner's *Norrtullsligan*, the story of Mrs. Pyy highlights how a woman's access to urban living does not automatically entail class mobility or a better lifestyle than her previous rural conditions.

In her comprehensive account of Mrs. Pyy's development into a middle class woman, Helena Ruuska has analyzed how Mrs. Pyy gets stuck in limbo where old ties to the countryside have been broken off, while new ties to the city are still fragile ("Kuin oltaisiin" 34). Thus, Mrs. Pyy does not thrive in the city, but she also does not want to return to the countryside of her childhood. In this sense, Mrs. Pyy's case resembles Arvid Järnefelt's novel *Isänmaa* (1893, *Fatherland*), as analyzed by Pertti Karkama in his account of rural modernisms in Finland. Karkama argues that the protagonist of Järnefelt's novel is precisely in a "limbo" or an "in-between-space" between the countryside and the city. However, unlike in Vartio's novel, disappointment in the city life of Helsinki leads Järnefelt to idealize the countryside and its pre-modern working community as utopian (Karkama 177). This comparison further highlights that Vartio's *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* opts neither to romanticize the countryside nor see it as a utopian place in the manner of, for example, Olsson's *Träsnidaren och döden*. Instead, the countryside representations of Vartio's novel are always connected back to mundane, everyday life (cf. Ruuska, *Arkeen pudonnut sibylla* 44). At times, rural childhood memories also cause Mrs. Pyy to feel estrangement, and even during her adult years, life in the country was not always easy: "Ja hän muisti, miten kotona aina ennen oli saanut tehdä työtä hämärään iltaan saakka. Oli aina kylmä, käsiä palelsi, aina oli likaista ja aina satoi" (Vartio 12).¹⁴⁰ Remembering the countryside is, most importantly, a means for Mrs. Pyy to escape her present moment and plight into an experience that she knows to be different but still imagined. Therefore, Mrs. Pyy does not actually desire to return to the countryside like Myyriäinen, and even the longed-for experience of getting back into

¹⁴⁰ "And she remembered how back in the day at home she had always had to work until the dusk of the evening. It was always cold, hands felt cold, it was always dirty and it always rained."

nature quickly turns into a tedious disappointment for her. When Mrs. Pyy spends time in a summer cottage surrounded by forests and fields, she imagines how a return back to the city with all its social hustle would be “like getting into heaven” (kuin pääsisi taivaaseen, 221).¹⁴¹

Additionally, the significance of the countryside for Mrs. Pyy is based on something entirely different than the communal and collective lifestyle of Olsson’s novel. For Mrs. Pyy, rural areas are meaningful precisely because they produce *distance* between people. She often comments on the overabundance of people in Helsinki and its crowded row house neighborhoods, and her long-term dream of owning her own suburban house is based not only on proximity to nature, but also on a wish to stay away from other people:

Mutta kun ikkuna avautuisi metsään ja kalliolle päin, voisi unohtaa, että asui kaupungissa . . . Minä olen syntynyt ja kasvanut suuressa maalaistalossa, ja jos elämä on minulle jotain velkaa niin ainakin sen, ettei minun tarvitse tuntea että joka seinästä tihkuu sellaisten ihmisten hengitys jotka ovat minulle vieraita ja vastenmielisiä. (Vartio 194-96)

But if the window [of the house] opened towards the forest and the rocks, one could forget that one lived in the city . . . I was born and raised in a big country house, and if life owes me anything then at least it owes me a

¹⁴¹ Anna Möller-SibeliuS has studied a similar ambivalence towards the countryside in Finland-Swedish author Bertel Gripenberg’s poetry collection *Den hemliga glöden* (1925, *The secret glow*), which attempts to mimic (and mock) modernist poetry. Möller-SibeliuS notes how the collection’s division into three parts – titled City, Countryside, and Life – reflect the ideological tensions of its time. The city and the countryside stand in opposition to one another but both are characterized by ambivalence. The lyrical I in the city longs for the peace of the countryside, while the lyrical I on the countryside longs for a pulsing urbanity (Möller-SibeliuS 227).

chance not to feel like every wall exudes the breath of people who are unknown and appalling to me.

In this quotation, the countryside turns into a place of escape from Helsinki's crowds of people and from the estranging and hypocritical nature of urban relationships. Throughout the novel, Mrs. Pyy has trouble trusting her neighbors and acquaintances in Helsinki, which is partly due to the instrumentalization of relationships; for Mrs. Pyy, becoming friends with specific groups of people, such as artists, is most importantly a means to build her own class identity. Twenty years after Olsson's utopian collectivism, Vartio's novel highlights the instrumentalization of relationships and, consequently, reflects how processes of urbanization and commodification accelerated in Finland only after the Second World War. According to Karkama, Finnish literature returned to pre-modern motifs in the 1950s, but during this second phase novels portrayed characters as estranged not only from their rural roots, but also from one another (190).

In agreement with Karkama's view, I would argue that *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* highlights the material reality of its time period and particularly women's opportunities to express themselves in an urban milieu. Mrs. Pyy constantly attempts to build her life and relationships in the city through shopping and material objects in order to achieve a certain type of class status. Gradually, this theme of consumption seeps into Mrs. Pyy's longing for the countryside as well, as is best exemplified by the suburban house that the Pyy family attempts to build. For Mrs. Pyy, the initial yearning for nature and the countryside associated with the suburban house gradually morphs into a desire for material ownership: "Minä en pyydä muuta kuin saada lopun ikäni katsella ikkunastani puita, ja saada tuntea että ne puut ovat minun ja että maa minun allani on minun" (Vartio

196).¹⁴² The suburban house project becomes less of a means for getting closer into a rural milieu and more of a symbol of middle-class status. What the quotation emphasizes is that the lot and its natural objects are “minun” (mine), in other words, owned by Mrs. Pyy. These desires of ownership collapse at the end of the novel due to a lack of money and an accumulation of debts. In Vartio’s 1960 novel, the process of urbanization has reached a stage where characters such as Mrs. Pyy can no longer return to their countryside roots, and even proximity to nature is only available through monetary means.

This section has focused on tracing the ambivalent experiences that rural regions evoke in their inhabitants in Nordic regional modernisms. The political commentaries and rural representations of these texts depend on the intersecting identities of the characters; as I have detailed, the Nordic countryside ranges from a future utopia of communal life to a backward threat to the developments of modernity, and further to a location that provides space for various feminist critiques. Although my analysis has pointed out the many aspects regarding modernity that Nordic regional texts have represented – from discussions of modern transportation to concerns about urbanization and the status of the Nordic countries in global geographies – rural texts are often judged as antithetical to both modernity and modernism. This tendency in modernist scholarship stems at least partly from the idea that modernism’s cosmopolitan and transnational nature is assumed to be connected to cityscapes and the major metropolises of the time. And yet, all kinds of concrete and imaginary movements take place in my regional case studies, not only between rural and urban areas, but across national and linguistic borders as well. In the

¹⁴² “I don’t ask for anything else except that for the rest of my life I am allowed to look at trees through *my* window, and to feel that the trees are *mine* and that the land underneath me is *mine*” (emphasis added).

following, final section of this project, I want to conclude my analysis of the tensions between national, transnational, and cosmopolitan thinking in regional modernist literature. My point is to argue that Nordic regional writing – far from being merely local and oppositional to the transnational nature of modernism – also discusses cosmopolitan aspects of modernity, and thus provides interesting case studies for the recent wave of transnational literary research within Nordic scholarship.¹⁴³

4.5. RURAL, NATIONAL, AND TRANSNATIONAL TENSIONS IN NORDIC REGIONALISMS

The relationship between modernism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism has often been discussed through the figure of the exile. As Anders Olsson points out, places such as “Berlin, Zurich and particularly Paris represent attractive metropolises for many Modernists *in spe*, giving rise to voluntary exile,” while modernism “also takes place in the midst of wars and persecution” that caused massive involuntary migration (38). Thus, both voluntary and enforced forms of travel and exile have had a significant effect on modernist literature (38; Karkama 175; Tidigs, “Here I am at home” 362). In the context of Nordic modernism, the figure of the exile has been discussed in relation to the center-periphery dichotomy. For example, Leonardo Lisi argues that it was precisely the peripheral status of Scandinavia that led many of its modernists into exile in Europe, where they served as mediators between the European cultural core and its peripheries (192). According to Lisi, the “cosmopolitan spirit that in large part came to define

¹⁴³ For recent transnational research published in Finland, see Heidi Grönstrand et al., Elsi Hyttinen, and Viola Parente-Čapková. Additionally, two comparative accounts of Nordic literature published in 2017 can be seen as a part of the recent transnational wave; see Margareta Petersson and Rikard Schönström’s edited collection *Nordens Litteratur*, as well as Steven P. Sondrup et al.’s *Nordic Literature: A Comparative History*.

modernism in the early twentieth century was already a necessity for Scandinavians a generation earlier, giving rise to a particularly fertile combination of global and local perspectives on the trials of modernity” (192). What these accounts on voluntary exile often strengthen – whether explicitly or implicitly – is the opposition between stagnating, rural provinces and progressive, urban metropolises; the modernist, cosmopolitan movement is always from the rural to the urban. Additionally, a focus on the cosmopolitan nature of modernism gives rise to the idea that “a Modernist national literature often appears to be a contradiction in terms” (Olsson, “Exile and Literary Modernism” 39).

As a way to sum up the complex negotiations that texts such as *Träsnidaren och döden* perform in relation to nationalism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism, I want to end this chapter by arguing that regional modernism complicates these common understandings of the relationship between modernism and travel. Regional modernism analyzes and often questions the opposition between progressive cities and conservative rural areas, as well as the implication that cosmopolitan travel is preferable for everyone and inherently connected to urban destinations. It can also question the perceived benefits and outcomes of (urban) cosmopolitan travel, such as artistic inspiration, personal fulfillment, or the development of progressive, world-citizen ideals. Additionally, as we have seen throughout this project, regional modernist texts are often deeply engaged with the topic of nationalism; not necessarily in a *nationalist* manner, but rather in a critical way that reveals how difficult it can be to imagine alternative ways of community and bonding beyond a national one. In addition to Hagar Olsson’s *Träsnidaren och döden*, I will briefly return to Marja-Liisa Vartio’s *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* and Eyvind

Johnson's *Stad i mörker* to illuminate these arguments and to conclude my interpretations of these regional modernist novels.

To begin with, I would argue that Olsson's *Träsnidaren och döden* presents Myyriäinen as an alternative type of artist figure in voluntary exile. Even though Myyriäinen begins his travels with somewhat nationalistic dreams of finding his childhood home and uplifting the arts and culture of his own people, there never exists any clear geographical or biological connection between him and Karelia or its people. From the very beginning, Myyriäinen knows that he *needs* to travel eastward, even though the novel implies that his actual "hemsocken uppe i norr" (northern home parish) is located somewhere else: "Han visste ju att han skulle österut, till de landamären där han hörde hemma, och något mera behövde han inte veta. Sin hemsocken uppe i norr hade han inte i tankarna" (32).¹⁴⁴ The eastern Karelian location to which Myyriäinen attempts to "return" during the course of the novel has, in fact, never been his actual childhood region. Instead, the feeling of being at home in Karelia is more a matter of spiritual and cultural than biological or national connection. This is further highlighted when Myyriäinen, during his travels, feels as though he has previously visited Karelia a long time ago, "kanske i en annan existens" (67, perhaps in another existence).

Additionally, Karelia constantly forces Myyriäinen to admit his lack of knowledge and to adjust his thoughts about the region as his travels progress. Even though Karelia reminds Myyriäinen of Finnish songs and oral traditions, it becomes even more strongly characterized by influences from further-away, eastern cultures:

¹⁴⁴ "Naturally, he knew that he had to go toward the east, to those reaches where he had his home, and he needed to know no more. His home-parish up in the north did not lie in his thoughts" (*Woodcarver and Death* 23-24).

[H]ur mycket mindre visste han då om det som rörde sig inom detta folk som han själv utgått ifrån men ändå på något vis blivit främmande för. Vad visste han om dess innersta fördrömda hemligheter? Han blev plötsligt medveten om att han här beträdde en kulturkrets som på ett väsensbestämmande sätt var vänd mot Östern och alltjämt stod i levande kontakt med impulser från avlägsna dunkelt upplysta århundraden . . .
(*Träsnidaren och döden* 36)

[H]ow much the less he knew of what went on within this people from whom he had sprung, and from whom he had somehow become estranged. What did he know of its innermost and dream-veiled secrets? All at once he realized that here he entered a culture which, in an essential and decisive way, was directed toward the East, which still stood in living contact with impulses from distant and duskily illuminated centuries . . .
(*Woodcarver and Death* 26-27)

As the narrator describes, Myyriäinen's ruminations lead him to suddenly become conscious of Karelian features he was previously not aware of. Myyriäinen realizes that Karelia is not only a cultural region that has definitively turned eastward, it seems also to be in touch with historical impulses that span centuries.¹⁴⁵ The quotation also points towards the crux of the post/nationalistic ambiguity of the novel; though Myyriäinen feels that he in some sense originates from the people of Karelia (detta folk som han själv

¹⁴⁵ Even though the novel depicts these eastern influences in a positive light as a preferable alternative to the (urban) West that Myyriäinen hopes to escape, this opposition between the West and its 'other,' as well as the association of the East with all things spiritual and mythical, have strong Orientalist connotations. Yet, I have not found any critical accounts analyzing Olsson's texts as Orientalist, despite the scholarship that details how Olsson was, both in life and in her literary works, critical of Western culture and interested in topics such as Byzantine and Russian cultures, Buddhism, and the Greek-Orthodox religion (Holmström; Ekelund).

utgått ifrån), he is not from the region he has travelled to, and there always remains something completely foreign to him in the locations, people, and customs that he encounters. This focus on the “främmande” (foreign) nature of Karelia is echoed later on in the novel:

Dessa bönder och köpmän kände han väl igen, de var folk av hans folk, livliga, språksamma, med den äktkarelska glimten i ögat, men det var något i deras uttrycksfulla gester . . . som var honom främmande. Det låg en hel värld av främmande tradition och symboler bakom deras intimaste livsuttryck. (*Träsnidaren och döden* 67)

He easily recognized these peasants and merchants, they were blood of his blood, lively, voluble, with the genuine Carelian glint in their eye, yet there was something in their expressive gestures . . . which appeared foreign to him. A whole world of strange traditions and symbols lay behind their hearts’ most intimate expressions. (*Woodcarver and Death* 54)¹⁴⁶

Again, the same contradictions and paradoxes arise; the authentic Karelians should be a part of Myyriäinen’s “folk,” yet he encounters “en hel värld” (an entire world) of traditions and symbols foreign to him. Very quickly after beginning his travels, the concept of a Finnish or Karelian culture that Myyriäinen thought he knew or owned is lost. The people he encounters are not the people of his nation – nor do they seem to be of

¹⁴⁶ Schoolfield’s English translation is a little misleading here, since it opts to translate “de var folk av hans folk” as “they were blood of his blood,” connoting more of a biological relation between Myyriäinen and the Karelian people than what the original implies. A more literal translation would read “they were people of his people.”

any nation-state at all – they are instead the people he wants to identify with through his art.

This focus on Karelia as a location of culture and art is central to both *Träsnidaren och döden* and the essay “Kalevala och Karelen,” where Olsson examines the Karelian origins of Finnish folk culture as well as the possibilities that Karelia provides for contemporary artists. Finland-Swedish modernist writing thus turns the countryside and especially the mystical, rural Karelia into a future utopian location with artistic potential (cf. Holmström, *Hagar Olsson* 305). As we have seen, a somewhat similar coupling of peripheral regions with artistic awakening and utopian potential takes place in Cather’s *The Song of the Lark*. Similarly to Thea, who leaves Chicago for Moonstone and Panther Canyon, Myyriäinen leaves the modern suburbs in order to find artistic inspiration by returning to the countryside that he connects to a cultural origin home. Furthermore, while Thea finds her artistic awakening through the ancient cultures of the cliff-dwelling peoples, Myyriäinen (in a similar manner) becomes inspired by the local community and centuries-long cultural history of Karelia. Just as Thea leaves behind her biological family and exchanges it to the connection she feels to the cliff dwellers, Myyriäinen abandons his mother – with whom he shared his urban apartment – to create a new spiritual connection and home with other members of the Karelian village.

By framing Myyriäinen as a modernist artist figure in voluntary exile in rural Karelia, Olsson’s *Träsnidaren och döden* turns urban-centered cosmopolitan ideals upside down. At the beginning of the novel, when Myyriäinen still lives on the “utkanten av den stora bullersamma staden” (11, edge of a big, loud city), he feels resentment

towards his urban surroundings: “Hur hade han kommit hit, till detta unkna rum där allt var honom främmande och förhatligt?” (19-20).¹⁴⁷ Myyriäinen has lost artistic inspiration in his urban setting and even considers the option of metropolitan-cosmopolitan travel as a way to restore his inspiration:

“Man skulle kanske ge sig ut i världen,” tänkte han. Och han mindes allt vad han hört om de stora städerna i främmande land där konstens heliga skatter förvarades . . . “Jag skulle hellre vallfärda till min barndoms gran och till de gamla kloka stenarna i min skog. Om jag bara kunde hitta vägen till dem.” (*Träsnidaren och döden* 22-23)

“Perhaps a person ought to venture out into the world,” he thought. And he remembered all he had heard about the great cities in foreign lands where the holy treasures of art were preserved . . . “I’d rather make a pilgrimage to the fir tree of my childhood and to the wise old stones in my forest – if I could only find the way to them.” (*Woodcarver and Death* 14-15)

Myyriäinen constructs an opposition between his own home country and the “great cities in foreign lands” where the “konstens heliga skatter” (holy treasures of art) are preserved. Yet, the idea of traveling to such places seems as foreign to him as his present, urban life, and he quickly dismisses the cosmopolitan trend in favor of the rural regions of his childhood. In Olsson’s version of voluntary exile, meaningful travel can take place from urbanity to rurality and within close proximity. Even without leaving his own country, Myyriäinen becomes an artist in exile and, in a sense, he fulfills the

¹⁴⁷ “How had he come to this place, to this musty room where all was strange and hateful to him?” (12-13).

cosmopolitan ideal of feeling at home in an environment and among customs that are foreign to him.

Thus, *Träsnidaren och döden* complicates modernist scholarship that associates transnational and urban-centered travel with modernist inspiration while deeming provincial and rural locations as stagnating. Though there are literary traditions that support such arguments, authors like Olsson point out that one must not fall prey to the assumption that rural living leads to politically and morally conservative thinking. Furthermore, *Träsnidaren och döden* portrays how *borderlands* as sites of multiple languages and cultures can fulfill cosmopolitan ideals just as well as international travel from the periphery of one country to the center of another.¹⁴⁸ In Olsson's novel, regionalism is not necessarily antagonistic with cosmopolitanism, but the text does suggest, perhaps surprisingly, that true traveling and artistry can also take place surprisingly locally and rurally, for example in the small towns of the Karelian countryside.¹⁴⁹

The case of Myyriäinen also points to the second complication of cosmopolitan ideals; namely, the idea that cosmopolitan travel is equally available and preferable to everyone. I already touched upon this topic in my discussion of Larsen's *Quicksand* – a

¹⁴⁸ See also Christopher Schedler's *Border Modernism*, which attempts to de-center the metropolitan bias of modernist scholarship by analyzing the locations of the "border" – such as frontiers, colonial peripheries, and borderlands – as multicultural and -linguistic sites of conflict and contact.

¹⁴⁹ A similar phenomenon was taking place in the United States, where artistic communities were forming in non-metropolitan, regional places such as Taos in New Mexico, Iowa City in Iowa, Lincoln in Nebraska, Nashville in Tennessee, and Charlottesville in Virginia (Dorman 31, 45). In Robert L. Dorman's analysis, artists and authors in these locations envisioned the region as "the utopian means for reconstructing the nationalizing, homogenizing urban-industrial complex, redirecting it toward an accommodation with local folkways and local environments. The region, it was hoped, would provide the physical framework for the creation of new kinds of cities, small-scale, planned, delimited, and existing in balance with wilderness and a restored and rejuvenated rural economy" (xii-xiii).

novel that complicates the possibility of cosmopolitan belonging for a biracial woman in the modern world. In *Träsnidaren och döden*, the difficulties of embarking on such journeys are discussed in terms of class. Both Myyriäinen and the narrator ruminate about how Myyriäinen has neither the material resources nor the necessary mindset for going abroad (*Träsnidaren och döden* 22). In a similar vein, Vartio's *Kaikki naiset näkevät unia* asks whether cosmopolitan travel is preferable even when it is materially accessible. Towards the end of the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Pyy arrange an expensive journey to Italy despite their recent bankruptcy, and the material costs of the trip are commented on in the novel. Their time in Rome is, more than anything else, a significant expense, consequently turning the entire cosmopolitan ideal into a touristic product to consume. Traveling is sweaty and tiring, and the beautiful artworks from the pages of her art books and travel guides that Mrs. Pyy had dreamed about seeing turn out to be mundane in reality:

Ja kun he sitten olivat löytäneet Medici-kappelin, he olivat niin väsyneitä ja ärtyisiä, että tuskin enää näkivät mitään. Mutta talo, jossa Michelangelo oli asunut . . . oli ollut pettymys, ei hän olisi sinne mennyt jos olisi arvannut, ettei siellä ollut oikeastaan mitään näkemistä. (Vartio 283)

And when they had finally found the Medici-chapel, they were so tired and irritated that they hardly saw anything anymore. But the house where Michelangelo had lived . . . had been a disappointment, she wouldn't have gone there if she had suspected that there really was nothing to see there.

As Helena Ruuska has analyzed, in the final chapter focusing on Mr. and Mrs. Pyy's trip to Rome, grand things turn into small ones and the holy becomes mundane

(*Arkeen pudonnut sibylla* 198). The sublime photos taken out of art books look banal in reality, the entire blackened chapel becomes reminiscent of a smoke-sauna, and the snake slithering in paradise looks like a familiar Finnish viper (*Arkeen pudonnut sibylla* 198). In other words, Mrs. Pyy's cosmopolitan wishes turn out to be another failed attempt at escaping her suffocating reality in Helsinki – much like her previous longing for the countryside. Strangely, however, Rome disappoints her by becoming too much like the rural home region of her childhood with its familiar buildings and animals. Mrs. Pyy does indeed make it to one of the great cities in foreign lands where great art works are preserved, but her cosmopolitan travel does not lead to artistic fulfillment or personal enlightenment. Instead, the trip brings only sweat, boredom, and a loss of money.

I do not attempt to suggest that regional modernism offers the countryside as a solution to the problems of modernity and urbanization, nor that all regional texts are utopian in their countryside representations in the manner of Olsson's writing. Rather, modernist texts set in the countryside are often fraught with tensions between nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and post-nationalism. Eyvind Johnson's *Stad i mörker* is an interesting case in point in this context. Despite the anti-rural tone of Johnson's text, the last pages of the novel end in an intriguing ideological twist through the words of teacher Andersson. After a sudden change of heart, Andersson seems to abandon his previous desires to become a sailor and go out into the world, concluding instead that "den enda resa som kan rädda en är den från hjärnan till hjärtat" (255).¹⁵⁰

Consequently, Andersson's final monologue emphasizes that the wish to achieve freedom and happiness through cosmopolitan travel is perhaps a naive idealization, and

¹⁵⁰ "the only travel that can save one is the travel from one's brain to one's heart"

that Sweden is significant because “vi är vana vid Sverige, har våra närmaste där, talar landets spark” (255).¹⁵¹ Thus, the novel ends with words celebrating the otherness and peripheral nature of Sweden itself; despite being a backward and dull state, the region can be embraced and accepted, since it is “vår” (our) location.¹⁵² This implication of Nordic exceptionalism could be seen previously in watchmaker Hammar’s contemplation of the world map, as he interpreted his town – no matter how small – as being the “kärna” (core) of the rural area around it.¹⁵³ In Johnson’s novel, the modern struggle ends in the victory of the rural-national and the elimination of the cosmopolitan. In other words, a rural region is employed to strengthen the state of the nation; by embracing the periphery in a patriotic manner, it can be turned into a little center of its own. Thus, despite its rural milieu, *Stad i mörker* does not adhere to the full definition of feminist regionalism. Instead of critiquing dominant discourses and portraying marginalized characters, the novel essentializes place from a masculine and nationalist point of view.

¹⁵¹ “we are used to Sweden, have our closest ones there, speak the country’s language.”

¹⁵² According to Bjarne Thorup Thomsen’s more positive take on *Stad i mörker*, the hopeful ending is in line with the novel’s attempt to show “that an off-centre and smaller-scale setting is capable of matching the metropolitan environment” typically associated with modernism (“Marginal and Metropolitan” 75). Thomsen further states that “While the town life in *Stad i mörker* has traditionally been interpreted almost exclusively in terms of stasis, suffocation and spleen . . . it additionally reads as a domain of constant mobility, nascent modernity, political conflict, and of new interpersonal constellations and affective bonds” (“Geomodernism and Affect” 8). In contrast, my reading points out how such phenomena take place largely in the domain of male characters, such as teacher Andersson and watchmaker Hammar, while female characters remain in stasis and suffocation.

¹⁵³ Hammar sees the town as “a little center, around which the countryside encloses itself - a core.” In the Swedish original: “*ett litet centra, kring vilket en landsbygd sluter sig – en kärna*” (Johnson 132).

Indeed, it is necessary to emphasize one final time that a rural milieu in and of itself is not yet a guarantee of critical, modernist regionalism.¹⁵⁴ Earlier, I discussed this issue in the context of American regional scholarship, where small town and rural writing has been analyzed, for example, as longing for ethnic homogeneity. Similar concerns have been studied in Nordic regional writing, as well: some authors have employed rural regions to promote reactionary counter-cultural movements, not only in nationalist, but in fascist takes as well (Ekman; Jonsson; Krouk). In his illuminating account of the interfaces between Norwegian modernism and fascism, Dean Krouk explains how the “ideology of the Norwegian fascist party is often seen as national-romantic, anti-urban, and nostalgic for a simpler or more authentic dream of peasant society” (21). Despite fascism being connected to modern techno-futurism, it also employed nostalgic ruralism in its strive for a fascist utopia (16). Moreover, fascism stemmed from and responded to the same changes and concerns that modernists such as Hagar Olsson were facing. Fascism critiqued, for example, excessive individualism, rationalism, and materialism. As Krouk explains, fascism connected rationalist liberal culture with spiritual death and sterility and, consequently, contrasted it to “an authentic local culture whose values the fascists co-opted and elevated” (20).

As previous scholarship has noted, it was due to very similar concerns regarding the individualism and rationalism of Western culture that Hagar Olsson constructed her utopian and nostalgic representations of rural Karelia. And yet, Olsson’s own political agenda stands in stark opposition to the phenomenon of fascism. In her essay writing,

¹⁵⁴ Neither do urban settings, cosmopolitan travel, or voluntary exile automatically lead to post-national and humanist ideals in modernist authors or their texts. Examples ranging from Knut Hamsun to Ezra Pound point to the fact that traveling and urban modernists also entertained thoughts of nationalism, Orientalism, and even fascism.

Olsson demands that modernist authors in the 1930s take explicit stances against the dictatorships and concentration camps of the world (Gustafsson 194; Holmström, *Hagar Olsson* 161, 257). In order for modernist writing to maintain any meaning or significance during the interwar period, authors needed to become “arbetare i natten” (workers in the night), ready to fight against the dark developments of European politics (Olsson, *Arbetare i natten*). But how do such arguments about the tasks of modernism transit from modernists’ self-reflective essays to their works of art?¹⁵⁵ Is *Träsnidaren och döden* the product of a modernist worker in the night, and does it manage to employ a utopian ruralism for humanist means, instead of fascist or nationalist ones?

In his discussion of the center-periphery model and the crisis of the nation, Cairns Craig draws from Homi Bhabha’s and Edward Said’s work to highlight the figure of the exile in unraveling nationalist thinking (25-29). Craig discusses the possibility for a more integrative view of community and quotes Said when asking

Who, however, can represent this post-nationalist ‘human community’?

Who can escape from the orders of the nation, either core or peripheral, to achieve such contrapuntal elevation? The answer is, quite literally, those who have left their nation behind but not yet acquired a new one: the utopian vision of a new humanity belongs to the migrant and the exile.

(26)

¹⁵⁵ Indeed, to demand for a certain type of a world or art in self-reflective essays typical to modernism can be quite separate from the (more difficult) task of actually implementing such visions in fictional prose writing. Fiction leaves space for ambiguity and (mis)interpretation, which is part of the reason why it is more difficult to understand *Träsnidaren och döden*’s relationship to nationalism and Karelia than, for example, Olsson’s rather straightforward critique of Finnish-nationalist and anti-Russian sentiments in her essay “Kalevala och Karelen.”

In a sense, this type of an exile figure representing a new human community is what Myyriäinen attempts to perform in *Träsnidaren och döden*. Despite Myyriäinen's initial ideas regarding Karelia, the novel entertains no thoughts of national or ethnic cleansing, nor does it come close to the nationalist celebration visible in the ending of *Stad i mörker*. What happens, rather, is a gradual questioning and deconstruction of the relationship between a region and a nationality. Even though Myyriäinen initially leaves for the Karelian borderland in order to find the cultural home of his nation, it is the nation that is gradually left behind, as Myyriäinen's initial ideas become questioned both by him and the collective we-narrator. Perhaps Myyriäinen is Olsson's version of the new Karelianist artist she hoped for in her essay "Kalevala och Karelen" – one that portrays the region as more "folk," more thoughtful, and less aestheticized (145-46). It is a true artist like Myyriäinen who can step on Karelian land as a voluntary exile and form a new human community without being a colonizing or aestheticizing guest.

Such re-employment of the national site of Karelia comes with baggage, however. There are remnants of nationalist logic in Myyriäinen's thinking that cannot be explained away and, consequently, Myyriäinen becomes somewhat of a flawed post-national exile figure. Such remnants were already visible in Olsson's essays; what made Karelia particularly universal to her was the post-war audience's ability to empathize with the loss of one's (childhood) home, which is, in some ways, connected to the idea of a national home. In other words, the "utopian vision of a new humanity" in *Träsnidaren och döden* is still fraught with tensions between nationalism and post-nationalism, cosmopolitanism and Orientalism, essentialism and discursive thinking. The utopian hope present in the novel is perhaps not so much in the figure of Myyriäinen, but rather in the

we-narrator, who winks at the reader to highlight the (ambiguous) power of narratives in constructing communities and creating new versions of locations previously employed for exclusively nationalist means.

As Heidi Grönstrand et al. highlight in their transnational research project that attempts to uncouple literary research from the frame of the nation-state, local is never merely local, for even local life is connected to other spaces through various networks (23). What I have suggested throughout this chapter and dissertation is that regional modernism not only deals with the local, but also with the transnational movements of modernism and modernity. Regionalism is not simply a stuffy version of localism, but always remains connected to cosmopolitan, transnational, and national debates. As we have seen in the case of Hagar Olsson's prose, instead of regionalism being in opposition to cosmopolitanism, regionalism can highlight an alternative form of world citizenship where traveling and modern forms of communal living happen in surprisingly nearby locations, and in strikingly rural settings. At the same time, regional texts highlight the centrality of countryside representations to modernism and the worldviews it produced. Regional authors such as Hagar Olsson and Marja-Liisa Vartio in the Nordic countries bring out how characters – even from the remote and peripheral locations of the world – can travel across geographical, national, and linguistic borders and bring to life alternative visions of the world and its communities.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Literary criticism, in Scandinavia as in other parts of the West, has typically defined modernism as that which is dense, complex, and far removed from the everyday realities of those who have been excluded from the canon – women and the working-class, for example. . . . Especially in an international perspective, it is exactly these lesser known writers and traditions that can contribute to a global understanding of how modernism develops differently – it starts and stops, while crossing national, regional, and linguistic boundaries – in different parts of the world. (Stenport 493)

Throughout this project, I have wanted to study the workings of modernism precisely from those perspectives that are easily excluded from the canon. Texts such as *The Song of the Lark*, *Quicksand*, and *Träsnidaren och döden* contribute to a global understanding of modernism by highlighting the everyday realities of various marginal and marginalized communities living in the midst of modernity. By staging their characters in rural settings, these modernist texts participate in political debates of their time, while showing how region can function as one of the intersections of identity along with gender, race, class, language, and nationality.

It has been central to my project to cover the unique historical, political, and cultural contexts of each of the three women authors I have focused on. Such contextualizing is particularly important whenever the goal is to discuss the politics of

texts that were written roughly a hundred years ago. From a twenty-first-century perspective, many of the texts I have analyzed could be easily and superficially dismissed as unimportant, conservative, or problematic, particularly as they engage with forms and narrative strategies that are often associated with traditionalism. As Guy Reynolds points out, “[o]ne of the problems with our accounts of literature’s political complexion is that to compare earlier texts with a modern ideological agenda is almost inevitably to dehistoricise literature” (24). What I have hoped to avoid is precisely the type of work that undermines the political complexity of these authors by exclusively focusing on strands of their writing that are problematic from our current point of view – whether it be the universalizing humanism of Olsson or the essentializing tendencies of some of Cather’s descriptions. Instead, one of the goals of my project has been to productively engage with authors and their politics in a way that, in the words of Sarah Wilson, “moves beyond presentist judgment” towards a fuller account of their ideological variability (7).

Willa Cather, Nella Larsen, and Hagar Olsson produced regional modernist texts that productively – and at times radically – engaged with central topics of their time. Their writing calls into question various institutions, from the biological and heteronormative family unit to the nativist, racist, and nationalist social structures and movements of early twentieth century. All three redefined and questioned many of the categories that were placed on them or on their literary characters – whether in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, or region. Consequently, their modernism was a politically engaged one that was interested in the hopeful, even utopian possibilities of transnational and peripheral locations of the world.

One of the problems of the spatial expansion of modernist scholarship has been the continuing focus on the transnational networking of urban modernist aesthetics, while the small town and countryside locations of modernism have continued to be neglected. As David James has argued, “[t]he danger is not so much that we will come to presuppose that transcontinental writing is inherently progressive, but that regional fiction will itself remain the generic ‘other’ against which the vitalities of global modernism are defined” (51). As I have shown throughout this work, regional modernism was not the generic ‘other’ of transnational modernism, but instead negotiated the complex relations between region, nation, and the globe from perspectives that have often been disregarded in literary criticism as minor, feminine, and peripheral. As the cases of Cather, Larsen, and Olsson show, however, such perspectives – as well as the rural locations where they were often negotiated – deserve to be further analyzed and studied in literary scholarship.

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