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BOOK OF EMPIRE:
THE POLITICAL BIBLE OF U.S. LITERARY MODERNISM

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

By

BARRY A. HUDEK

August 2017

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ABSTRACT

“Book of Empire” reveals that contrary to what is often suggested by scholars, modernism is not a moment of secularization and declining faith and that the Bible is actually a resource for mounting a radical critique of empire, nation-building, and racial oppression that defies conservative notions supporting those undertakings. For Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Zora Neale Hurston, the Bible is a source of moral authority they use to challenge the imperialist, colonialist, and nativist projects of the twentieth-century U.S. In rebranding the Bible as politically radical, these writers are not denying the authority of the Bible, but are re-appropriating it for their socially dynamic purposes, suggesting that conservatives are not reading the Bible correctly. If they were, they would find critique of empire, nationalism, and racial oppression—elements of a progressive agenda in a text too often enlisted to defend the status quo.

DEDICATION

To my wife Patty, who has lovingly read every word of this dissertation. Thank you.

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I am grateful to Jay Watson for his patient and thorough readings of my drafts. Without his direction this project would not have been completed. Thank you for getting the best out of me so that this work can exist in its current form.

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This dissertation is not as strong without archival materials from the Willa Cather collection at the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The Cather Project at UNL generously awarded me their James Woodress Fellowship which provided me a month of research time in the Cather Archive and material from that experience is included here. My Cather chapter would not be as strong without the Woodress Fellowship.

Scholarship improves in community, so I also want to thank Sarah Clere for her suggestion that Psalm 47.4 evokes Jacob and Esau as a stand-in for Anglo-American relations with Native Americans. Thank you to Max Frazier for finding research materials that are included in my chapter on Willa Cather. J. D. Williams's librarians Alex Watson and Cecelia

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I. INTRODUCTION: RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND THE U.S. POSTCOLONIAL BIBLE

The Power of *the* Book:

Nation-Building, Imagined Connections, and Biblical Models for National Behavior

The Bible has a literary influence upon English literature not because it has been considered literature, but because it has been considered the report of the Word of God.

-T. S. Eliot

Modern culture is a scripture. It is biblical in its force and its authority.

-Michael Levenson

In the Septuagint Bible (the first translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Koine Greek about third to second century BCE), the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings are grouped into one book in four parts: the Books of the Kingdoms. No wonder, too: Kingdoms is not the story found in Exodus of Israel's wanderings in the desert to forge a people ready to govern themselves. Kingdoms is not the story of Israel's entry into the Promised Land recorded in Joshua. Rather, Kingdoms details Israel's rise to prominence in establishing its first king, Saul; the rise of King David and his subsequent imperial conquests and civil wars; and the dynastic continuity in the exploits and failings of the Davidic line from Solomon to the Babylonian captivity. In other words, these books trace Israel not as a fledgling people, but as a nation coming into its own and gaining power and prestige as it expands— particular attention is paid to David's military, religious, and economic expansion (which ends in

effectual destruction of the nation, of course). Additionally, the era recorded in Kingdoms witnesses the Hebrews' solidification of religious practice from a loosely organized and diffuse clergy and cult to one firmly planted in the imperial center of Jerusalem under the rule of a centralized and professional priesthood, in a powerful military and executive figure, and in the creation of the Temple. In short, Israel became a religiously based empire that firmly linked divine guidance and sanction with a national military, cultural, and economic formation.

Likewise, the Puritans who landed in the new world also sought divine guidance in forming a nation. To them, the new world and their subsequent rise in it was an "errand in the wilderness" to bring about God's shining "city on a hill." Even more, they "discovered America in the Bible" in which America was a "prophecy" long hidden in the Judeo-Christian scriptures (Bercovitch 223). The Puritans believed that the prophetic and mysterious language used in the Bible was a sign of their eventual conquest of a new Promised Land, the North American continent.¹ In fact, like other scripturally based religious communities, the Puritans proudly wore the label of a "People of the Book" (Jeffrey xiii). Through their attachment to Judeo-Christian scripture, the Puritans saw themselves as God's new nation on earth as they sought divine guidance in forming a nation, building an empire, and dealing with racial others (Native Americans). With obvious parallels to Israel's own formation and rise, then, this thinking became a foundational idea in American culture that "amounted to an imperialism of the word unrivaled in modern times. The Puritans came to America not to usurp but to reclaim, not to displace an alien culture but to repossess what was already theirs by promise" (Bercovitch 223). Ultimately, the "Puritans provided the scriptural basis for what we have come to call the myth of America"—a myth "grounded in the Bible"—and to this day "Americans keep returning to that rhetoric, especially in times of crisis, as a source of cohesion and continuity" (219). Indeed, this

Puritan influence in mythmaking and the use of biblical rhetoric shaped New England culture and was present when the colonists broke with England to found the U.S., when the United States entered its Civil War, when the U.S. extended its national boundaries across North America and beyond, when it rose to its own prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to become an imperial power, and when it fought two World Wars in the twentieth century. Altogether, seeking biblical guidance and utilizing biblical allusion were typical features of the rhetoric of U.S. politicians and lay persons alike that powerfully linked the Bible and biblical literacy with education, individual and national identity, and cultural formation as U.S. citizens, too, became a “People of the Book.”

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, U.S. citizens were so enmeshed in this nexus that they were saturated in biblical literacy. Through a combination of personal bible reading, reading communities, religious publishing of numerous bestselling Christian books, and Bible stories interlinked with educational texts, people during these times simply knew the Bible (namely the King James Version of the Bible) backwards and forwards. They used the Bible not only as a source of personal piety but as a powerful tool in forming their personal identity and national culture. Paul Gutjhar puts it this way: “When it came to the printed word, early Americans often gloried in the fact that they were a people who ‘knew much of the Bible’ and ‘little besides’” (1). Stephen Prothero points out that there “may have been Bibles in as many as nine out of ten homes in the early republic,” and that the “Bible was the book for reading in households and schools well into the nineteenth century.” Through this exposure, many “children read the Bible cover to cover multiple times before adulthood, and families gathered regularly in the morning or evening (or both) to pray, sing hymns, and read the scriptures” (77). In fact, U.S. nineteenth-century education, both public and domestic, interwove

religious texts into the curriculum to combine the King James Bible with a sense of national citizenry. Susan K. Harris points out that Noah Webster sought “to create a specifically ‘American’ primer.” His textbooks “beg[an] by imprinting Christian moral regulations on the brain of the neophyte reader. For instance, his ‘Blue-Blackened Speller’ reinforce[d] moral identification with Christian precepts by ample quotation from the Bible.” Thus, a “self-consciously ‘American’ element occur[ed] in the suggestion that the culture into which the child [was] being socialized [was] both a model of Christian society and a major agent in God’s plan to evangelize the world. Together, the speller and the History succeeded in imprinting the image of an American landscape in which church and state, even if legally separate, walked hand-in-hand toward national and global redemption” (107). Other early public education advocates such as Horace Mann insisted that the King James Bible be interwoven with public education so as to create a national character linked with Christian morality (Fessenden 66). The immensely popular *McGuffey’s Readers*, too, fused Judeo-Christian morality, readings from the Bible, education, and nationalism in their pedagogical ethos. The *Reader’s* creator, William Holmes McGuffey, was a clergyman, professor, and educator who fused religion and professionalism to such a degree that, John Westerhoff writes, “the mind and spirit of McGuffey cannot be understood apart from his understanding of God. Neither can his readers. From the First and Fourth Reader, belief in the God of the Old and New Testaments is assumed” (76). What is more, the first lesson given in McGuffey’s *Eclectic Fourth Reader* (1838) instructs pupils that religion is “the only basis for society.” Religion, it insists, is “not merely a private affair” but exhibits “the best support of the virtues and principles, on which the social order rests” (151). Even more, most Anglo-Protestant families fused their Bible reading with personal history. Gutjhar writes that “one of the most popular means of verbally inserting oneself into the

immortal biblical narrative was through the family records page.” Anglo-Protestants “meticulously used family pages to record not only names and dates, but places of birth, occupations, causes of death, and important personal characteristics” (146). Through “such intersections, people quite literally fused personal narratives to the biblical narrative. Consequently, the Bible served American Protestants not only as the Book of Life, but also as the book of their lives.”

Thus, the Bible in public schools, domestic educational efforts, and personal attachment to biblical story helped shape a national character that subscribed public identity formation with U.S. democratic values and Bible reading. These combined forces of public education, civic virtue, and Christianity created a culture of people that Harris calls the “national Christian” (104)—“a figurative representation of an American who embodied the culture’s racial, religious and behavioral values.” In all these ways, Anglo-Protestants combined personal scriptural reading, public education, and also a strong belief in U.S. political institutions to craft the U.S. into the image of a Christian nation. As Robert Alter argues, “it was in America that the potential of the 1611 translation to determine the foundational language and symbolic imagery of a whole culture was most fully realized” (*Pen of Iron* 1). Thus, he writes, the King James Bible was “justifiably thought of as *the* national book of the American people” (emphasis added 41). As a matter of fact, on the three-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the Kings James Version in 1911, both Woodrow Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt independently praised the Bible in this way. Roosevelt called the King James Bible “the book to which our people owe infinitely the greater part of their store of ethics, infinitely the greater part of their knowledge of how to apply that store to the needs of our every-day life.” “No other book of any kind ever written in English—perhaps no other book ever written in any other tongue,” he continued, “has ever so

affected the whole life of a people as this authorized version of the Scriptures has affected the life of the English-speaking peoples” (in “Democratic Book”). In a separate speech, Wilson called the Bible “the people’s book of revelation.” Citing the Bible’s power to animate, Wilson continued, “America is not ahead of the other nations of the world because she is rich. Nothing makes America great except her thoughts, except her ideals, except her acceptance of those standards of judgment which are written large upon these pages of revelation” (in “Democratic Book”).

Likewise, U.S. Christians found common cause with ancient Israel in their imaginings, while also finding wisdom and instruction from their sacred texts, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. This seeking of wisdom and instruction from the powerful imagined connection to Palestine (Israel) led to a tendency to conflate contemporary U.S. experience with that of ancient Israel—to read the present typologically, searching for present-day meaning and parallels in past biblical events. Alter explains that this “identification with biblical Israel meant that it was the Old Testament far more than the New that was the biblical text of reference” for U.S. citizens, since “the Hebrew Bible was pervaded by a sense of national destiny deeply engaged in history, whereas the New Testament addressed individuals in urgent need of salvation” (*Pen of Iron 2*). Nineteenth and twentieth-century U.S. citizens likewise found in Hebrew scripture an attractive sense of national destiny that gave weight to their own sense of engagement with history. Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way in 1863: “To say the truth, England is never out of mind. Nobody says it, but all think and feel it. England is the model they find their wishes expressed” (190). Herman Melville’s *White Jacket* (1850) provides commentary, albeit sarcastically, on the contemporary connection between the United States and ancient Israel, arguing, “Israel of old did not follow after the ways of Egyptians. To her was given an express dispensation. And we

Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. [...] God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans” (151). He then asserts that “[l]ong enough have we been sceptics [sic] with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings” (151). Here, Melville implies that imperialism will be the result of this special mission if the U.S. can wean itself from thralldom to England (Egypt). Traversing the Pacific from his vantage point aboard the *U.S.S. United States* likely shaped his thinking.

Through their imagined connection with ancient Israel, Americans saw themselves as a redeemer nation—a righteous, divinely guided polity purposed and chosen to do God’s work on earth. Conrad Cherry describes this religious justification for foreign and domestic affairs in his book, *God’s New Israel*. He writes, “the belief that America has been providentially chosen for a special destiny has deep roots in the American past [...] It has resided at the heart of the attempt by Americans to understand their nation’s responsibility at home and abroad” (1). Moreover, in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson illustrates the importance of these biblical justifications by pointing out that the nation has “strong affinity with religious imaginings” (10), because like many religious groups, and “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (11). U.S. connotations with ancient Israel, thus, made for a natural and attractive comparison in shaping a nation. Not surprisingly, then, this mindset was used to justify national expansion across the west and national expansion beyond the contiguous United States in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, as U.S. citizens used their connection to the Bible to “comprehend, accept,” and “master” their environment (Feder 11). Many Anglo-Protestants

would also use these biblical justifications and rhetorical moves not only to exclude racial others from participating in the national culture, but for the oppression of blacks and the removal of Native Americans as the nation expanded during this same period.

Like Israel's own rise under King David, during the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century the United States would grow from a fledgling nation, emerging out of civil strife to become a prosperous military, religious, and economic actor on the world stage. The Spanish-American War (1898-1899) would propel the U.S. in this direction. As Spain's influence in the Caribbean and Western Hemisphere waned, uprisings and independence movements sprang up throughout its colonial possessions. More specifically, Cuba began fighting for independence against inhumane and corrupt Spanish rule. The U.S. sympathized with the Cubans' struggle. Not only did Americans feel a connection towards fellow revolutionaries throwing off a colonial master, but, more importantly, they sought closer economic and military ties to the island—an island long part of the U.S. expansionist imaginary.² To justify military intervention in the conflict, many U.S. citizens and politicians turned to the Bible in shaping messianic imperialist culture.

A healthy dose of Anglo-Saxonism helped the U.S. in its redeemer mission as well. A belief in the racial and cultural superiority of those with Anglo-Saxon ancestry provided a ready explanation for the superiority of U.S. institutions and practices. Coupled with Social Darwinism, this thinking offered a reason “for the numerical and political dominion of the race in the world” (McCullough 85). Actually, Anglo-Saxonism “became the chief element in American racism in the imperial era” (Hofstadter 172). Thus, “Anglo-Saxon theorists on both sides of the Atlantic believed God had developed their race for a glorious global purpose. Viewed through this lens, the events of the [Spanish-American] war seemed an unmistakable

sign that long held hopes [of racial dominion and superiority] were finally to be realized” (McCullough 84). Armed then with a belief in their similarity to biblical Israel as a redeemer nation, with justifications from the New Testament, and with a belief in their own racial and cultural superiority, Anglo-Protestants created a particular mindset: messianic imperialism, a belief that through military, cultural, economic, and religious intervention the U.S. could uplift and “save” supposedly inferior nations and peoples and bring them into the light and life of civilization. More than that, messianic imperialism held that the U.S. was divinely ordained to undertake actions on behalf of other nations to benefit those nations. In so doing, the U.S. would be enacting God’s will on earth and would be rewarded both on earth and in Heaven for acting as God’s agent. The oft-quoted messianic imperialist Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana exemplified this spirit, stating in a speech to Congress that “God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples” (in Harris 79). For Beveridge, Anglo-Saxons were the natural overseers of the world, so not to administer their gifts would be an affront against God.

Anglo-Saxonism also contributed to a phenomenon sometimes compatible with messianic imperialism and sometimes at odds with it: nativism, or the belief that the U.S. is a nation for white, Anglo-Protestants. Ironically, imperialist impulses helped create turn-of-the-century U.S. nativism. Nativists held a religiously based idea of their own sacred mission to protect the United States against foreign influences, yet imperial activity threatened either

directly or indirectly to bring non-white people into contact with dominant U.S. Protestants, thus creating a conflict between two religiously based ideas—what Amy Kaplan calls the “anarchy of empire” (12). Kaplan argues that the newly established U.S. empire created a state of chaos among traditionally white Protestant leaders who found themselves overseeing waves of immigration and administering an external empire over different populations. This “anarchy” forced U.S. citizens into the reality that they were not alone; the people in the newly acquired territories and the non-Western European, non-Protestant immigrants arriving in major U.S. cities wanted, in many cases, inclusion and participation in the national scene. Nativists had qualms about these developments, however. Would “non-natives” be allowed citizenship? Would such inclusion introduce chaos into what was viewed as a homogeneous nation? With these issues in mind, a turn-of-the-century white American could be anti-nativist and pro-imperialist or, conversely, be anti-imperialist and pro-nativist given the potential for contradictions between the two positions.

Nativists wondered how immigrants and colonial subjects could (or whether they should) be included as U.S. citizens given their difference from the majority Protestant culture. Nativism, writes John Higham, “should be defined as intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., ‘un-American’) connections.” For Higham, nativists encompassed multiple stratifications within U.S. society. He writes that whether “the nativist was a workingman or a Protestant evangelist, a southern conservative or a northern reformer, he stood for a certain kind of nationalism” (4)—code for white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. The code also dictated that people outside of these norms were to be watched with suspicion and / or considered not truly part of the nation. “Whether he was trembling at a Catholic menace to American liberty, fearing an invasion of pauper labor, or simply rioting against the great English

actor William McCready,” the nativist believed “that some influence originating from abroad threatened the very life of the nation within” (4). To the nativist, “the immigrants were the source of municipal squalor and corruption, to workingmen a drag on wages, to militant Protestants the tools of Rome; and to nearly all their critics the newcomers were agents of discord and strife” (77). Just as messianic imperialists sought biblical and religious justifications for expansion beyond U.S. borders and justifications for involvement in foreign conflicts, nativists, too, sought religious justifications to maintain the U.S. as a homogenous Anglo-Protestant nation. Ray Allen Billington points out that “there was little doubt in the minds of most propagandists that [immigrant] paupers were dumped on America’s shores by European countries anxious to be rid of their responsibility, and to undermine the United States” (194), since those “countries,” nativists were convinced, “wanted to drain off their undesirable population and [...] further weaken the United States and make easier its conquest” (195). As such, saving the U.S. from the cultural menace posed by immigration was a religious imperative given the conflation between nationhood and Christianity. Thus, when Eastern European, Irish and Italian, German Catholic, Chinese and other Asian, and Russian immigrants began arriving in the U.S., they were met with a hostility and suspicion rooted in a vague Anglo-Protestant sense of mission to protect a divinely sanctioned national-religious order against foreign influence, just as Israel had been forced to protect itself against outside pressure as commanded throughout the Hebrew Bible. Throughout U.S. history, then, the Bible occupied a complex relationship to the nation, its policies, and its people. In this way, the Bible many Americans knew intimately played a vital role in the ways U.S. citizens and politicians interpreted their personal lives and worldly events, often giving them reasons to act on their political beliefs.

Twentieth Century Changes:

Secularization, Crises of Faith, and Problems of Empire

By the 1920s and 1930s (a decade or so earlier for intellectual elites), however, the Bible began to lose its standing in shaping the nation. Grant Wacker writes that these decades “seem to have been the decisive years that marked a transition from an American ethos based on the Bible’s teachings to a culture less aware of, less interested in, and less convinced by Sacred Scriptures” (122). These changes began in the nineteenth century as Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory was laid out and German Higher Criticism (an undertaking that explored the historical roots and composition of the Bible—especially the Hebrew Bible—arguing for multiple authors and redactors) took hold in U.S. universities, eventually to reach the nation’s intellectual and cultural elite.³ Additionally, because economic and technological advances had created enormous wealth for some but also crippling poverty for far more, many of the faithful lost heart in the face of such social injustice. All told, current scholars of the era point to these foundational changes as the beginning of secularization in the U.S. In Britain, Matthew Arnold had responded to similar changes by advocating for literature to replace religion in a society for which the Bible was still relevant even if not considered the inspired word of God. As Ward Blanton argues, “Arnold presented the Bible as of inestimable value for—even inextricable from—the striving of cultural progress.” For Arnold, the Bible was “a perennial source of inspiration and cultural education” (611) that allowed modernity to produce “a remarkable literature in which loss, and even the loss of religion, was itself recuperated into the life of ‘culture,’ ‘literature,’ and even religion itself” (614). Anti-modernists like Arnold recognized the

tension behind the biblical and religious underpinnings of a society that sought commercial and monetary success despite biblical warnings otherwise. T. J. Jackson Lears argues that the “process of secularization exacerbated the problem of personal moral responsibility and contributed significantly to the sense of unreality underlying the crisis of cultural authority” at the turn of the century, a period when, “for educated Americans, secularization meant primarily a particular dis-ease: a sense that American Christianity had begun to lose moral intensity and that as a result, the entire culture had begun to enter what Nietzsche called a ‘weightless’ period” (41). Because of these changes, Lears writes, Americans “sensed that familiar frameworks of meaning were evaporating; they felt doomed to spiritual homelessness” (42). A spiritual crisis was looming.

In fact, the changes wrought by modernity created a theological battle between modernists and fundamentalists in church history. The modernists were willing to adapt Christianity to scientific developments such as Darwinian evolution and to German Higher Criticism. In this new world, Christian modernists turned their focus from literal truths of the Bible to a Social Gospel aimed at helping the downtrodden. This gospel sought justice for all through social and governmental programs, not solely through spiritual transformation.⁴ The fundamentalists, on the other hand, rejected modern encroachments, seeing Darwinian evolution and German Higher Criticism as pernicious influences degrading the true spiritual nature of Christianity. According to historian George Marsden, “the fundamentalists’ most alarming experience was that of finding themselves living in a culture that by the 1920s was openly turning away from God. [...] Modernism and the theory of evolution, they were convinced, had caused the catastrophe by undermining the Biblical foundations of American civilization” (3). In their view, the U.S. was rapidly moving away from its biblical moorings and they, therefore,

thought Christianity should be measured by the winning of souls and the demand for repentance in an ever darkening age. They felt the narrative of the U.S. as a biblical “People of the Book” was no longer valid or valued by society at large, a loss that was a sign of impending spiritual doom.

For the fundamentalists, too, humanity was inherently evil and could not be redeemed through social programs that they viewed as a waste of time. The era’s transformation from an rural-agrarian to urban-industrial population—and the resulting chaos of immigration by non-white, non-Western peoples—only strengthened fundamentalist belief in society’s inevitable destruction, and in the imminent, literal return of Jesus.⁵ For fundamentalist Christians, then, the U.S. was irrevocably lost as a result of these societal changes. While scholars point out that church attendance remained stable during this period, and that the perennial successes of religious bestsellers throughout the twentieth century offer evidence of an active faith and continuing interest in spiritual matters, what changed, they argue, was the preeminence of the Bible in American public and private life. While the Bible was still widely read, fewer and fewer people filtered national life through connections to biblical Israel. As such, the narrative of the U.S. as a messianic, Anglo-Protestant redeemer nation began to crack.

One important element that is missing in this narrative of the U.S. as a biblically literate redeemer nation with a divinely ordained mission on earth is, of course, the role of black Americans in building and participating in the nation. Anti-black racism underpinned the belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and the nativist mindset and helped fuel messianic imperialism as well. This racism allowed white citizens to ignore the plight of native peoples wherever the U.S. intervened abroad and, closer to home, to marginalize the “undesirable” immigrants who allegedly threatened to weaken and undermine the nation’s cultural integrity. Worse still, an

obvious racism was present in the way specific Bible passages and other stories were cited to justify Anglo-Protestants in their treatment of blacks. For instance, Ephesians 6:5 states for servants (slaves in many subsequent translations) to “be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.” Titus 2:9 “[e]xhort[s] servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things.” The Hebrew Bible in Leviticus 25: 44-46 and in Exodus 21: 2-6, 20-21 gives rules and justifications to the Hebrew community for the ownership and treatment of slaves. Even more, Noah’s curse on Ham has been used as a curse against Africans and, therefore, a justification for enslavement. David Goldenberg writes that the story of Ham is the “single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years.” However, “even though there is no reference to Blacks at all,” just about everyone in the antebellum South “understood that in this story God meant to curse black Africans with eternal slavery” (1). The mark of Cain, too, has similarly been used to suggest that black Africans were doomed to eternal subservience by divine mandate.

Even if the dominant turn-of-the-century Protestant Christianity did not advocate or excuse slavery and racism, the dominant story seemed comfortable ignoring the plight of blacks—black Christians were simply not part of the Anglo-Protestant redeemer nation story despite the longstanding practice of Christianity within the African American community. “Unfortunately,” James Cone writes, “American white theology has not been involved in the struggle for black liberation. It has been basically a theology of the white oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and the enslavement of Africans” (4). What is more, most African Americans do not see the U.S. in the same way as Anglo-Protestants. In *Redeeming the South*, Paul Harvey puts the matter this way: “Anthropologists have explained

how religion provides mythological underpinnings for particular cultures, while it also allows dissident groups a chance to formulate alternative visions for a new order” (4), but for “most enslaved Christians [...] the evangelical faith provided not so much the fuel for violent revolt as spiritual protection from the heinous system of racial subjugation supported by their ‘white brethren’ as God’s plan to Christianize the heathen” (9). Indeed, to many black Africans the U.S. is not a redeemer nation chosen by God but an oppressor, a modern-day Babylon. “Babylon,” Werner Kelber writes, “had become a proverbial expression of anguish and enragement in the face of foreign, imperial oppression. One of the pivotal features of John’s Apocalypse is the fierceness and relentlessness of judgment that it pronounces on Babylon” (107). In their dissident view and alternative narrative, then, many African Americans saw the U.S. not as the righteous Israel of the Hebrew Bible, as Anglo-Protestants liked to believe, but as more akin to the ancient enemies of the Hebrews: the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Assyrians.

African Americans tend to read and use the Bible differently than Anglo-Protestants, too. Instead of searching for justifications for their power as white Americans did, black Americans sought refuge and strength in stories of individuals triumphing over an oppressive state in figures like Daniel, Moses, Ezekiel, and Jonah. The Exodus narrative, of course, also figures prominently in linking black Americans with ancient Israel, as a people struggling against oppression to find freedom and build a nation in hostile surroundings. Eugene Genovese points out that “[h]owever much Christianity taught submission to slavery, it also carried a message of foreboding to the master class and of resistance to the enslaved” (165). As such, the “slaves did not often accept professions of white [religious] sincerity at face value; on the contrary, they seized the opportunity to turn even white preaching into a weapon of their own” (190). Biblical texts were thus enlisted in both the legitimization and the subversion of slavery and white

supremacy. Blacks used Judeo-Christian scriptures to forge “weapons of defense, the most important of which was a religion that taught them to love and value each other, to take a critical view of their masters and to reject ideological rationales for their own enslavement” (Genovese 6). This thinking became codified as black liberation theology, as African Americans sought scripture in times of need throughout their history in North America. Cone describes this theology as that “of a community whose daily energies must be focused on physical survival in a hostile environment.” (11) In this context, Cone adds, it “matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppression” (33). The need for textual support in the struggle against injustice did not end with Emancipation. Jim Crow, lynching, segregation, economic inequality, racist real estate practices, and forms of racial exploitation still with us today have continued to motivate African Americans to turn to scripture for defense against oppression.

My point, then, is while the “redeemer nation” narrative was a widely held belief among a majority of U.S. Christians, it was a contested and critiqued narrative even when it held sway for most U.S. citizens, especially in an era of secularization and declining faith. For fundamentalists and Christian nationalists, the decline was a tragedy. Liberal Christians, Social Gospel Christians, and other white Anglo-Protestant Christians, on the other hand, believed the Bible was being used incorrectly to justify false ideals. Many in the latter groups began to see the problems inherent within nation-building, imperialism, and racial oppression. Black Christians, too, continued to point out their marginalization within U.S. society as victims of oppression by a Bible-believing “People of the Book.” These groups battled rhetorically, symbolically, and in actuality over whose version of the Bible, of Christianity, and of U.S. history was correct. Along the way, as Blanton puts it, the Bible “became a key historical, theological, and ethical

battleground in terms of which important cultural definitions about self-definition—not to mention the definition of the excluded other—were to be established and solidified” (605). All sides sought the moral authority of the Bible as the national book that would be the grounds for their specific views about the soul of America.

Textual Weapons:

U.S. Literary Modernism and Biblical Critiques of Empire

Biblical justifications for U.S. nation- and empire-building thus encountered a two-fold problem: first, U.S. citizens and thinkers began to see the corrupting influence of imperialism on the nation and its culture. The pursuit of national expansion internally and beyond U.S. borders was deemed by many as greedy, ruthless, and anything but a selfless, messianic mission of uplift and loving and serving your neighbor. Additionally, some Anglo-Americans began to recognize their race problem. All told, a portion of society began to critique cultures of U.S. imperialism as unacceptably costly, and indeed as un-American. R. S. Sugirtharajah notes that since “empires always act in their own interests, they are often insensitive to indigenous cultures and their best intentions are likely to end up being unhelpful” (225). Americans seemingly began waking up to the reality of empire, as U.S. treatment of Native Americans and black Americans compounded the ironies of the nation’s encounters with foreign people to expose Anglo-Saxon arrogance and racism.

Pearl Buck and the Results of Messianic Missionary Imperialism

Even though this study focuses on U.S. literary modernism, one interwar U.S. realist author of historical fiction serves as an interesting case study in the critique of messianic imperialism and overseas missionary activity. In *The Exile* (1936), Pearl Buck explores the impact of a missionary life on her mother, Carie, especially in a patriarchal world that looked upon her contributions as secondary, or not important at all. Calling her a “living embodiment of America” (245), Buck compares her mother with the hopes and ideals of the nation, a nation that longed to see Christianity spread (through American missionary work) throughout China. For Buck, Carie is a microcosm of these national aspirations: “To all of us everywhere who knew her this woman was America” (315). Yet Carie struggled in her role as missionary. Buck writes that during her childhood Carie sought a sign of God’s favor that would allow her to believe in a divine calling or purpose, but after years of hardship and difficult work in China, “she almost forgot her secret trouble—that God never had really given her a sign” (103). Ultimately, Buck surmises that Carie, disillusioned, lonely, and frightened, “would have considered her life a failure if she judged it by the measure of what she had meant it to be. [...] The search for God, the need of the deep, puritanical side of her multiple spirit, was never fulfilled” (313). In this way, Carie was consumed emotionally by her life as a missionary in China. The promise of adventure and “winning souls” did not live up to her expectations. She instead was disillusioned by her life’s work, all to suggest unknown and unintended consequences of messianic missionary activity in China both for herself and for the Chinese.

Other consequences of messianic imperialism within the missionary endeavor emerge in Buck’s account of her father, Andrew. In *Fighting Angel* (1936), she details his ambulatory missionary strivings throughout China. Buck observes that her father had a particular spiritual

proress for missionary work: “born of the times and of that fighting blood, he chose the greatest god he knew, and set forth into the universe to *make* men acknowledge his god to be the one true God, before him all must bow” (emphasis added 54). For Buck, her father’s “god” seems to be a product of his cultural circumstances entirely compatible with the idea of the U.S. as a messianic redeemer nation whose simple people act as God’s agents. Calling his mindset a “magnificent imperialism,” a “spiritual imperialism [that] was as natural as the divine right of kings was to Charles the Second,” Buck portrays an Andrew who exhibits the “that same naïve and childlike guilelessness of the king” (154) and would “have been pained and astonished if anyone had ever told him he was arrogant and domineering” (154-155). For Andrew, his views are right and he imposes them on others because of their rightness. Such thinking would lead Andrew and other messianic missionaries into trouble, though. In the wake of China’s own nativist uprising, the Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901), Buck writes that the “mind can acknowledge the force of the Chinese right to refuse foreigners upon their soil, it can acknowledge the unwarranted imperialism of such men as Andrew, righteous though they were, and honorable in intent of good meaning. The mind,” she concludes, “says people have a right to refuse imperialism,” though the “heart shudders” at the resulting carnage (162). For Buck, the Boxer Rebellion is an obvious consequence of missionaries like her father who, through their imperious mindset, force their views on others without understanding what they are doing.

What is more, Buck suggests, Andrew and others cannot see their actions as imperialism. She writes that since her father “belonged to the blind,” he “would have been amazed if anyone had told him that the Chinese had the right to protest the presence of foreign missionaries upon their soil,” since to do would be tantamount to “protest[ing] the actuality of the true God, his God” (163). After the uprising and threat to their safety, Andrew, Carie, and the family returned

for a furlough in the U.S. They went back to China a year later and, much to Andrew's surprise, found that instead of "hostility he met everywhere a mask of courtesy and compliance" (177). As Buck explains, "Andrew found himself, as all white men did at that period, possessing a power of which he had been unconscious" (177-178). Her father "took it as God's triumph," but Buck knows better: after "the summary punishment given by the white men to the Chinese of the Boxer uprising[,] [w]ord had gone all over the Chinese empire" about white men who as a result, "being strong and swift and fearful in retribution, came to be feared and hated and envied and admired and used. Every white man was a little king" (178). Her father understood none of this. Instead, in the wake of these changes he "proceeded in great strides over that part of China which he considered his spiritual kingdom" (178). Buck thus portrays her father's missionary activities in militaristic, racial, and imperial terms. In this way, she reveals his activities not as benevolent strivings in the name of humanity, but as a threatening attack on the Chinese way of life. Instead of seeing Andrew as a Christian ambassador, the Chinese people were fearful of possible physical retribution if they rejected or, worse, attacked Andrew. He mistook these signs. His inroads, then, were not due to God's movement, but to the threat of military or physical retribution by U.S. and European powers.

As Buck and others began to question the use of biblical texts to justify imperialism, national expansion, and the treatment of racial others, for some Americans the Bible still held a moral and spiritual authority that could be used to change minds and alter the culture for the better. In fact, a scripturally based *critique* of empire was being formulated even as the rhetoric of messianic imperialism took shape around the Spanish-American War. One such critique can be found in the works of William Jennings Bryan.⁶

William Jennings Bryan: A Grounding in Biblical Critiques of Empire

Bryan is perhaps best known for his role in the Scopes trial. However, well before that final chapter in his life, Bryan was a leading advocate of a liberal-Democrat Social Gospel who repeatedly attacked big business and big government in championing justice for the common people. His political career as a statesman from Nebraska resulted in three unsuccessful presidential campaigns (1896, 1900, 1908) after which he served as Secretary of State before resigning due to a conflict with President Woodrow Wilson. He was also an outspoken critic of U.S. imperialism, citing both the New Testament and Hebrew Bible to condemn justifications (justifications often themselves based in religious language) for military and territorial expansion. For instance, in an 1898 speech entitled “Naboth’s Vineyard,” Bryan alludes to King Ahab’s unjust acquisition of the titular vineyard as evidence of the rapacious nature of greedy rulers.⁷ Connecting this biblical event to the growing controversy over the spoils of the Spanish-American War, Bryan writes, “wars of conquest have their origin in covetousness, and the history of the human race has been written in characters of blood because rulers have looked with longing eyes upon the lands of others” (6-7). In also alluding to the famed “writing on the wall” passage from the book of Daniel, Bryan suggests, contrary to popular opinion, that U.S. acquisition of Cuba, the Philippines, or other territories would not be divinely ordained, since “[c]ovetousness is prone to seek the aid of false pretense to carry out its plans, but what it cannot secure by persuasion it takes by the sword” (6). For Bryan, biblical justifications seem to be a screen for greedy territorial acquisitions, like King Ahab’s unjust actions against his subjects, and like the “writing on the wall” condemning Belshazzar in Daniel as a sign of imperial corruption and impending doom for the Babylonian empire. As Bryan points out in these examples, prideful empires are brought low by their own hubris, and the U.S. might be in similar

danger if it keeps acting in this way. “Imperialism,” Bryan continues in his speech, “might expand the nation’s territory, but it would contract the nation’s purpose” (7). Instead, in keeping with the rhetoric embedded in “our national ideal” (8), the U.S. should foster immediate self-government in any newly acquired territory, since other “nations may dream of wars of conquest and of distant dependencies governed by external force,” but “not so with the United States” (8).

For Bryan in these speeches, any religious justification for imperialism went against the nature of Christianity, and he cited numerous examples from scripture in his many speeches and writings to support his case. Bryan critiques the supposed need to evangelize to Filipinos and Cubans as justification for imperialism: “If true Christianity consists in carrying out in our daily lives the teachings of Christ, who will say that we are commanded to civilize with dynamite and proselyte with the sword?” (44). “Imperialism finds no warrant in the Bible,” he continues; “the command ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature,’ has no Gatling gun attachment” (44). Suggesting that history is “replete with predictions which once wore the hue of destiny, but which failed of fulfillment because those who uttered them saw too small an arc of the circle of events” (10), he points to the foolish pride displayed by the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians who likewise felt sure of conquest, but were upended instead. For Bryan, just such imperialistic arrogance will be the undoing of the U.S. “If we embark on a career of conquest,” he argues, “no one can tell how many islands we may be able to seize or how many races we may be able to subjugate.” But, he warns, “neither can any one estimate the cost, immediate and remote to the Nation’s purse and to the Nation’s character” (12). Despite his criticism of Christian nationalism, Bryan remained steadfast in his Christian beliefs. He attempted to reform Christianity as a critical yet fellow believer, and he believed in the Social Gospel as an answer to

many of the growing changes brought by modernity. He believed people were inherently good and that government could and should be used to foster the public good.

Bryan never worked out his Social Gospel to include blacks, however. Instead, like most Anglo-Americans, he was mostly silent on the subject. Calling his Social Gospel “blind to the parallels between domestic racism and the international variety” (93), Bryan biographer Michael Kazin argues that Bryan’s racial politics stemmed from his political outlook. Bryan, Kazin says, “could believe in a mass of pious ‘commoners’ in perpetual conflict with a greedy and irreligious elite only if he omitted black people from membership in either camp” (93). For Bryan, it seems, blacks did not register as either corrupt or as pious citizens. This contradiction in character between personal outlook and political outlook seems to have stemmed from political expediency. Given that most of his Populist supporters were white and pro-Jim Crow, Bryan “felt little pressure to change a stance that excluded millions of Americans,” Kazin argues (94). Indeed, “he seemed to consider the presence of nine million black citizens to have no great political significance at all” (94). For Bryan, African Americans did not fit his biblically based narrative of U.S. politics. Even though Bryan’s biblical critique of empire is commendable, he shows the glaring blind spot held by so many in this era. Nevertheless, Bryan did maintain a consistent critique of empire through biblical allusion and arguments from the Bible—an endeavor carried on decades later by some U.S. literary modernists in a multi-layered form.

The Double-Edged Sword:

The Biblical Critiques of Empire and Modernist Critiques of the Bible

Out of this historical grounding, U.S. literary modernists offered their takes on changing biblical norms, literacy, efficacy, and the meanings of scriptural texts in the modern world. I use

Marshal Berman's simple definition of modernism "as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves home in it" (5). As such, modern people "are moved at once by a will to change—to transform both themselves and their world—and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart." To be modern, he writes, "is to live a life of paradox and contradiction" (13). For Berman, modernity is a never-ending quest to build, grow, expand, destroy and rebuild. To live in this framework, then, Berman argues, "is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (15). Along these lines, then, U.S. literary modernists worked to come to grips with empire, nation-building, racial relations, and other forces and phenomena of modernization. That is, to be modern in the U.S. was to be a product and / or subject of empire; imperialism was a way of life shaping the modern world and the modern subject. Seeking to create a national literature that could both rival their European counterparts in technique and encapsulate American life, U.S. literary modernists were interested in defining the particular features of U.S. life as differentiated from the cultures of England, Ireland, and Western Europe. Mark Morrison writes that in the "late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many American writers (modernists or not) were grappling with the 'American-ness' of their own writing, seeking to understand what could define their literature as a national literature and not simply as a provincial footnote to English literature" (12).

When Marcel Duchamp derogatorily remarked, that the "only works of art America has given us are her plumbing and her bridges" (in Roth 27), U.S. literary modernists took exception and strove to create art worthy of worldwide consideration. As the U.S. rose to prominence, too,

so did its art. Morrison continues, “[a]s America increasingly asserted itself on the world stage—becoming an imperial power at the turn of the century, reluctantly, but successfully entering World War I, and grappling with its relationship to the League of Nations after the war—nationalism and understandings of the arts’ relationship to national identity metamorphosed a number of times” (12-13). To many U.S. modernists, the commitment to and biblical endorsement of empire by the middle class was a mistaken and, worse, harmful view and they, therefore, sought to understand how their art could critique and influence U.S. culture. Some of them even offered living proof of Edward Said’s idea that the “intellectual’s role is to present alternative narratives and other perspectives on history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission” (141). As Lewis writes, modernists, “[p]erceiving a gap between the meaningful inner life of the individual consciousness and an outer world that shapes that inner life but seems devoid of spiritual meaning [...] sought a means to bridge that gap, to glean a meaning from that apparently senseless outer world.” In so doing, they “found it in the idea of a national consciousness, which lent an apparently eternal, if not universal, significance to their isolated experiences and offered a matrix through which to interpret events that otherwise appeared to lack any internal logic” (*Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* 4). When it came to the Bible, then, many modernists offered an alternative narrative that challenged the Anglo-Protestant notions of progress and empire to explain how that narrative impacted the “national consciousness” and the individuals affected by the majority view—and they often did so from within that dominant milieu. Black modernists, too, offered a dissenting view of the accepted story that illustrated their interpretation of U.S. national culture as a place of oppression. They also sought to create a distinct modernism that captured the

features and aspects of black life in the U.S.—a life often shaped by biblical justifications by whites of supposed black inferiority.

It should also be noted, though, that many modernists rejected the Bible altogether for a secular way of thinking, offering a secular critique of U.S. nationalism and the Bible's role in shaping U.S. culture. For them, the Bible was too entrenched in the status quo of middle-class, Victorian belief systems to be of value—for many modernists, Ezra Pound's call to "make it new" could not be reconciled with the ancient Bible. For instance, Pound clearly advocated for the secular within the modernist movement. Writing that "Christian theology is a jungle," he argued that "unsquashable" facts were needed to see clearly in this new age: "True criticism will insist on the accumulation of these concrete examples, facts, possibly small, but gristly and resilient, that can't be squashed, that insist on being taken into consideration" (in Levenson, *Modernism* 275). Wallace Stevens, too, searched for religious meaning after the loss of God in what amounted to "a habit of mind" for him. Searching for "some substitute for religion," he came to conclude that his trouble, "and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we are all brought up to believe" (in Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* 1). Stevens seems distraught by the loss but also to find it evident and irreversible, even if he would like it to be otherwise.

Blanton puts the tension between secular modernists and those who still valued the Bible this way: "For some moderns, latter day bearers of the slogans of radical Enlightenment, the appropriate way for modernity to relate to religion was by way of disenchanting or secularizing critique. For others, modernity was to be the moment of a profound repetition or appropriation of biblical myth, with the role of the artist that of making clear the modern, contemporary value of biblical texts" (603). Nevertheless, these writers typify Pericles Lewis' idea that the "modernists

hoped to shock the middle classes out of their complacency” (*Cambridge Introduction* 13). Indeed, a “significant number of modernist writers thought that their work could serve as a sort of prophesy that might guide their own nations or all of Western Civilization through this period of conflict” (*Cambridge Introduction* 16). Even more, “[h]igh modernists in the years before the First World War,” Levenson writes, “often saw themselves in urgent struggle against the multitude” (*Modernism* 104). Whether secularist or coming from some sort of religious tradition, modernists took issue with the way the Bible was read and employed by the middle classes. Some modernists thus rejected all notions of the Bible / religious language as too much a part of the authority and tradition of period culture, but others directed the Bible’s cultural force against a world they wanted to change.

Like biblical prophets of old, then, modernists of all stripes offered society warnings, critiques, and exhortations towards a better way to live under modern circumstances. Too often, they seemed to think, the public (like the ancient Hebrews), ignored real wisdom in favor of things that tickled their fancy, not what was true of society. Myth and use of the Bible became for many (but not all) modernists a battleground of interpretation in which they offered ironic, challenging, and alternative readings to speak back to middle-class culture. Essentially, the Bible was the perfect book for these explorations, since as Lewis argues, “Modernists sought to understand religious experience anew, in the light of their own experience of modernity” (“Modernism and Religion” 188). For many, a critique of empire was one facet of their response. The fact of empire in the modern world was something they sought to interpret and offer commentary upon, and they found a useful critique of empire in the Bible. Operating within a still biblically literate world, U.S. literary modernists were thus especially equipped to engage scripture and to likewise engage the public with representations that influenced the nation.

Indeed, their knowledge of the King James Bible allowed many modernists to communicate their prophecy to a reading public familiar with scripture. Indeed, “[t]hose American writers who wove into their prose elements of the language of the Bible,” Alter argues, “could scarcely ignore what sundry biblical texts were saying about the world, and so they were often impelled to argue with the canonical text, or to tease out dissident views within the biblical corpus, or sometimes to reaffirm its conception of things, or to place biblical terms in new contexts that could be surprising or even unsettling” (4-5). In this way, the Bible acts both as an instance of mass culture and as a trenchant modernist text for myth-making, commentary, and critique as U.S. literary modernists engaged scripture and the public in their battle to change outdated modes of thinking.

The Bible and the “Mythical Method”: Aesthetics, Ideology, and Practice

In using the Bible in this way, the modernists are straddling the line between the everyday, popular culture of quotidian Bible reading and the repackaging of biblical allusion under what T. S. Eliot calls the “mythical method.” Writing on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*—a novel rife with allusion, parallels, and myth—Eliot argues that in “using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.” This method “is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history.” From Joyce’s example, Eliot argues, modernists can take “a step toward making the modern world possible for art. [...] And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance” (167). The method, then, is one enmeshed in text,

context, subtext, and allusion—allusions to classical Greek, English, and, of course, the Bible that offer meaningful commentary on the modernist's world in referencing the ancient.

The “mythical method” would be particularly useful in the way U.S. modernists engaged biblical allusion as they worked out what it meant to be modern. In using myth to provoke the middle classes, the modernists were particularly interested in what Paul Ricoeur calls the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” That is, modernists and other philosophers of the era questioned Anglo-Americans’ interpretations of events, especially of the Bible. Citing Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, Ricoeur argues they are “masters” in the “school of suspicion” (32) who influenced modernist writers to create this particular characteristic of the modernist age, in which “the apparent, or manifest meaning of an idea or text is thought to be in need of decoding in order to discover another hidden or latent meaning generally unknown to the original thinker or author” (*Cambridge Introduction* 18). Such reading looks at texts “against the grain” and is actually born out of the nineteenth-century attempt to “read the Bible critically” (18). Thus, U.S literary modernists were suspicious of white Protestant society’s interpretations of the Bible. They wondered how politics and unconscious influences shaped the dominant culture’s biblical interpretations. What is more, modernists delighted in reworking biblical material to illustrate dissident and alternative readings—readings they believed were correct, or that teased out knowledge with contemporary relevance better than standard and traditional readings of the Bible. In this way, U.S. literary modernists seemed to believe they knew the Bible better than the masses even though those masses were highly biblically literate. They might have even been drawn to the scriptural idea that “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:13). In drawing on scripture as

a “two-edged sword,” modernists may have appreciated the idea that if applied correctly, biblical allusion could pierce the thoughts and intentions of conservative readings of scripture to expose misapplications of the scripture in private and public life. Even oblique, seemingly throw-away references to the Bible in their work often highlight meanings and motivations behind their characters’ actions and undertakings, often exposing the consequences and corruption inherent in viewing the U.S. as a religious nation on par with ancient Israel. Thus, biblical allusion works beyond mere aesthetics in which allusions can become fuel for ideological and political commentary.

In fact, the Bible has worked in this fashion for many people and nations as a way of combating and subverting oppressive states. Robert Young argues that “Postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further” (7). A “postcolonial Bible” thus serves to emphasize alternative views of empire with an ideological and rhetorical trove of resources to turn against imperial modes of power that often employed Christianity and the Bible to legitimate empire. Suggesting that there is “no reading [of the Bible] that is not already ideological” (4), the Bible and Cultural Collective puts it this way: “Ideological reading, as we define it, is a deliberate effort to read against the grain—of texts, of disciplinary norms, of traditions, of culture.” Such readings “raise critical consciousness about what is just and unjust about those lived relationships” and “change those power relationships for the better” (275). Postcolonial critique is, of course, most commonly used in studying African, Caribbean, and South American nations as well as India. But, I argue, a postcolonial Bible exists within the U.S. as well. This postcolonial American Bible is used by two groups: by African Americans in their struggle against slavery and U.S. internal colonialism and by dissident members of the Anglo-Protestant majority who use scripture to critique Anglo-

American pro-empire and racially oppressive views. I thus turn to three case studies to illustrate the literary and political potential of this U.S. postcolonial Bible. For Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Zora Neale Hurston, the Bible is a source of moral authority they use to challenge the imperialist, colonialist, and nativist projects of the twentieth-century U.S. For these authors, the Bible carries cultural authority since so many Americans regard it as the Word of God. Thus, in rebranding the Bible as politically radical, these writers are not denying the authority of scripture, but are re-appropriating it for their socially dynamic purposes, suggesting that conservatives are not reading the Bible correctly. If conservatives were reading the Bible correctly, they would find critique of empire, nationalism, and racial oppression—elements of a progressive agenda in a text too often enlisted to defend the status quo. The modernists’ use of the Bible as a source of moral authority reveals that contrary to what is often suggested by scholars, modernism is not simply a product of secularization and declining faith, but also a movement capable of turning to the Bible as a resource for mounting a radical critique of religious nationalism that defies conservative notions supporting those undertakings.⁸ Noting that “criticism of the Modernists tends anachronistically to read back into them a blithely secular point of view,” Lewis suggests instead that their attitudes are “complex” when it comes to “the phenomenon of secularization” (“Modernism and Religion” 180). With a particular emphasis on U.S. literary modernism, my work expands and extends this notion.

The Word Made Fresh: Biblical Allusion as Social Commentary

More specifically, I examine *My Ántonia* (1918) to illustrate how Cather ironizes Old Testament nativist purity in the book of Kings and Jewish imperialism in Psalm 47 to critique white Protestant justifications for empire during the Spanish-American War and U.S. nation-

building in the plains. Her novel also includes an oblique reference to the widely popular religious novel, *The Prince of the House of David* (1855) by Joseph Holt Ingraham. In making this connection in *My Ántonia*, Cather further exposes the false narrative of Anglo-America's ability to save and uplift others. Additionally, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) critiques U.S. empire in Haiti by using the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel to expose the false righteousness of imperial actors. The novel shows how the subaltern space of Daniel's furnace becomes the crucible of the imperialist's undoing, the space where the contradictions of imperialism emerge in full view. The project then explores non-Anglo scriptural critiques of empire, nation-building, and racial oppression. In turning to African American engagement with scripture as a resource for radical critique, Zora Neale Hurston in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) draws on a well-known sermon form in the black community—the Dry Bones sermon—in order to illustrate the social crisis facing an African-American congregation in the modernizing world of interwar Eatonville, Florida. Drawn from Ezekiel's "Valley of Dry Bones" passage, the Dry Bones sermon attests to the power of preaching and prophetic utterance to breathe life into a people, to help them live and cohere as a nation when faced with destructive outside forces antithetical to community.

Each of these authors was exceedingly well-versed in the Bible. Regardless of what they believed about Christianity (whether or not they should be considered Christians is beyond the scope of this study), they knew the Bible, and it made a lasting impact on their prose and its content. For them, the Bible is a text that still contains moral authority and, as such, is useful in engaging readers in their contemporary world. For Cather, in fact, art and religion were inextricably linked. Her longtime friend and companion Edith Lewis points out that Cather "was a deeply religious person—but in the way that Shelley was religious, though he called himself an

atheist; one might say in the way that Shakespeare was religious. I think that with her, religious experience immediately transformed itself into art—that to her, religion and art were one” (Charles E. Cather Collection, October 19, 1950). Cather herself famously wrote that “[t]here is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that’s [sic] my creed and I’ll follow it to the end, to a hotter place than Pittsburgh if need be” (Letter to Muriel Gere, August 4, 1896). Despite her cheeky response to Gere, Cather “knew the Bible very well, especially the Old Testament. It had been very firmly planted in her when she was a child. She sometimes read the Bible, and the Episcopal prayer-book” (Robert and Doris Kurth Collection, October 19, 1950).⁹ This dedication to religious materials would not go unnoticed by scholars. Edward and Lillian Bloom argue that the “pervasive religious temper of the land manifest throughout the frontier novels grows out of Miss Cather’s deliberate attempt to parallel the pioneer’s mission with the introspective search of the Old Testament.” Essentially, “[l]ike the ancient wandering tribes of Israel, Willa Cather’s pioneers have gone forth into the wilderness, searching for an ideal and a sanctuary from a troubled existence. And there in the wilderness they often find their sanctuary” (29). Cather herself confirms her connection to the Hebrew Bible in her *Not Under Forty*: “Whether we were born in New Hampshire or Virginia or California, Palestine lay behind us. We took it unconsciously and unthinkingly perhaps, but we could not escape it. It was all about us, in the pictures on the walls, in the songs we sang in Sunday School, in the ‘opening exercises’ at day school, in the talk of the old people, wherever we lived.” “And,” she continues, “it was in our language—fixedly, indelibly”; the “effect of the King James translation of the Bible upon English prose has been repeated down through the generations, leaving its mark on the minds of all children who had any but even the most sluggish emotional nature” (101-102). The Bible certainly left its mark on Cather, shaping her narratives and providing fuel for her imagination.

William Faulkner's knowledge of the Bible is well documented, too. Faulkner's own titles illustrate a deep biblical literacy: *Absalom, Absalom!* is, of course, a reference to King David's lament over his son Absalom's death. Further, Faulkner's preferred title for *The Wild Palms, If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*, references Psalm 137 (a psalm written during the Babylonian captivity), and *Go Down, Moses* alludes at once to Exodus and to the slave spiritual of the same name, additionally signaling the author's familiarity with Hebrew scripture. Not to mention the too-numerous-to-count biblical allusions throughout the corpus of Faulkner's work.¹⁰ Christine Smith simply points out that Faulkner "was thoroughly familiar with the Bible and lived in a culture that assumed biblical literacy." Because of this, "one is on solid ground in looking to the Bible for a source of possible clues to discover unstated sentiments in Faulkner's work" (100). Similarly to Cather, Faulkner notes in an interview that in his upbringing "[e]verybody, children on up through all adults present, had to a verse from the Bible ready and glib from tongue-tip when we gathered at the table for breakfast each morning; if you didn't have your scripture verse ready," Faulkner continues, "you didn't have any breakfast" (Meriwether and Millgate 250). Alter writes that Faulkner "claimed that he read all the way through the King James Version every ten or twelve years" and listed "the Old Testament" as "among the books he had loved as a young man and to which returned as to old friends" (78). In all, the biblical "old friends" of Faulkner's youth not only deeply color his prose style but are embedded in his storytelling, too.

For Hurston, her reading began as a child after finding the family Bible. Her parents and members of the community thought her and a friend who was reading along with her very devout. Hurston admits an interest in some of the stranger aspects of the Hebrew Bible, however. She writes in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* that "on one occasion I happened to open to the place where David was doing some mighty smiting, and I got interested. David went

here and he went there, and no matter where he went, he smote 'em hip and thigh. Then he sung songs to his harp awhile, and went out and smote some more. Not one time did David stop and preach about sins and things. All David wanted to know from God was who to kill and when. He took care of the other details himself. Never a quiet moment. I liked him a lot. So I read a great deal more in the Bible, hunting for some more active people like David" (40). After finding David to her liking she began reading in Leviticus and learned some, well, adult knowledge: "There were exciting things in there to a child eager to know the facts of life," she says of that reading. "In that way," she continues, "I found out a number things the old folks would not have told me. Not knowing what we were actually reading, we got a lot of praise from our elders for our devotion to the Bible" (40). From those early readings in the Hebrew Bible she stresses an activism based on biblical material in her work, maintaining that "[e]xcept for the beautiful language of Luke and Paul, the New Testament still plays a poor second to the Old Testament for me. The Jews had a God who laid about Him when they needed Him" (3). For Hurston, the stories in the Hebrew Bible excited her passion, especially regarding the power of the Bible in offering hope to those in difficult circumstances.

The authors in my study use seemingly oblique references to the Hebrew Bible and other religious material in "controlling," "ordering" and "giving shape" to manipulate "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Eliot 167), primarily in order to illuminate or demystify the contemporary. In their novels, in fact, the references come and go quickly, so much so that a reader could mistakenly dismiss them as unimportant. Instead, I argue that these references are valuable to a study of the novels and their engagement with history. Given that allusion and cultural literacy are so enmeshed into the modernist project, U.S. literary modernists' scriptural engagements are no accident even if they are brief. Scholar Alan Nadel

has instructively addressed the importance of allusion. In “Translating the Past,” he argues that the “term ‘allusion’ is inextricably linked to a concept of simultaneity: it identifies a point in rhetoric when we are made aware, through various devices, of a parallel” (639). Thus, an allusion can become a marker in the reader’s mind to suggest the importance of the alluded-to text, uncovering “new potential in old material,” “stimulat[ing] the imagination in a way that causes one to see both texts anew” (645). While “[n]o one allusion is likely to drastically alter our interpretation [...] a creatively novel usage always *might* have a significant impact” (650). By exploring the themes and ideas within the alluded-to texts, we can see them boomerang back to their respective novels in a manner that offers insight into Cather’s, Faulkner’s, and Hurston’s views on nation-building, empire, and racial issues.

Towards a “Middle-Ground” Modernism:

The Bible as Both Popular Culture and Classical Allusion

The “new modernist studies” revitalized interest in the modernist period by exploding the “sharp boundaries between high art and popular forms of culture,” thus allowing those boundaries to be “reconsidered” (Mao and Walkowitz 737). Put simply, the new modernist studies of the late 1990s “have made the case for texts, authors, and literary movements within modernism that they believe deserve more attention” (“Beyond the Usual”). In so doing, the reengagements challenged postmodern criticism that “damned modernism as obscure, elitist, and politically disengaged at best” (“New Life”), the work of sagely distant modernist writers who were unaware and largely disapproving of popular and mass culture, making trenchant and obscure allusions and references to classical texts that only a handful of readers would understand or even care about. Any references to the popular or everyday were dismissed by

scholars and critics alike. Or, as Juan Suarez puts it: “Modernism had allegedly been elitist and disconnected from the social and material life of modernity” (1), so that “connections to modernity’s material, sexual, political, and popular cultures, where they found much of their inspiration, were regarded as anomalies or marginalia that had little bearing on aesthetics. As a result,” he writes, “modernism appeared strangely disembodied and sublimated, unhinged from some of its most vital contexts” (2). While the authors in my exploration occupy canonical status, their use of the “vital context” of the Bible as a means to reconsider contemporary politics has been overlooked. Altogether, I argue for a “middle-ground modernism,” whose representative figures do illustrate the traditional view of the modernist writer by making obscure references but are also attuned to the popular culture and politics of their contemporary moment. Their use of the Bible, I argue, is key to understanding this “middle-ground modernism” in which scripture functions both as an ur-text for classical allusion and as a popular and political document capable of speaking to biblically literate contemporary readers.

Chapter one, then, focuses on three specific allusions in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918). The novel tells the story of Jim Burden and his family as they negotiate life on the Nebraska prairie during its frontier era. Jim’s story is also negotiated through his relationships with various immigrants making their way to the open plains. Burden is especially attached to a Bohemian immigrant, Ántonia, and the novel is his framed reminiscence of her. Cather portrays Jim and the Burden family as typical, Bible-believing Anglo-Protestants who fuse education, literacy, and their personal lives through scripture. For example, when Jim first moves to his grandparents’ farm after his parents’ death, his grandfather reads several psalms and particular attention is paid to Psalm 47:4, “He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob

whom He loved.” Jim responds to his grandfather’s reading, but “wishe[s] he had chosen one of my favorite chapters in the Book of Kings” (57).

I read these moments as ironic commentaries on messianic imperialism and nativism. Psalm 47 celebrates an ascendant Jewish nation that dreams of conquering the world as a divine mandate, a reference that points to U.S. messianic imperialism. The novel also reveals Jim’s own interest and part in nation-building in the U.S. West in that as an adult he often raises funds for “young men” with “big Western dreams” of achieving “remarkable things in mines and timber and oil” (48). Thus, Jim is colonizing natural resources for economic gain. His interest in Kings, too, reveals a connection to nativism in that Kings assesses the ability of each of Israel’s kings after David to maintain religious order and practice in the face of outside influences. The kings who do well are those who maintain a strict adherence to Jewish law. The kings who are critiqued are the ones who intermix with foreign peoples, thus adulterating the Hebrew nation. Through these allusions, I also show how the Burdens represent the U.S. messianic desire to “save” and “uplift” others, namely the immigrants (especially the Shimerdas) making their way into the U.S. interior. However, the Burdens’ failure in this regard is additionally highlighted in a reference to a popular Christian bestseller, *The Prince of the House of David*, which Mrs. Burden wants to read to forget her troubles with her neighbors. Cather uses these scripturally based allusions to challenge and critique religious notions of messianic imperialism and nativism and to implicate the Burden family specifically in nation-building and internal colonialism.

Chapter two builds from a strange phrase in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) used to describe the novel’s investigative focus, Thomas Sutpen. Suggesting that Sutpen has undergone a “solitary furnace experience,” Faulkner’s narrator attempts to make sense of the enigmatic figure on his arrival in north Mississippi in 1833. I read this phrase as an allusion to

the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, I see Faulkner's phrase as a reference to the "fiery furnace" episode in Daniel 3, where three Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, are thrown into a furnace for refusing to bow down and worship a statue that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar set up. Their acceptance would have been tantamount to a betrayal of their religious heritage, and they refuse to do so as a matter of religious principle. They are rewarded for their defiance and are saved from the furnace by a divine being, whereupon Nebuchadnezzar praises the God of Israel and comes to his senses. Daniel serves Faulkner as an important textual reference that carries postcolonial themes, demonstrating how a minority group is able to subvert a dominant power through its resistance to cultural assimilation.

However, in Faulkner's reworking, the Daniel text becomes an ironic commentary upon both U.S. imperialism and the internal colonialism of the plantation system. I argue that Sutpen undergoes a "furnace experience" of his own on Haiti but emerges not in triumphant subversion of an imperial order but instead as an imperialist, a Nebuchadnezzar figure. His furnace experience occurs when the white Sutpen willingly quells an uprising of black Haitians who set fire to a sugar plantation. In so doing, he forsakes his original mission to undermine the planter class—a representative of which humiliated him when he was a boy—and becomes an agent of oppression. In this way, Faulkner additionally comments on U.S. messianic imperialism in critiquing the U.S. occupation of Haiti that was just concluding when he began composing *Absalom*. Faulkner's exposé shows that, like Cather's Burden family, the U.S. is not actually able to save and uplift those racial or political "dependents" it claims to help, further illustrating the corrupting influence of empire upon individuals and the nation.

Chapter three transitions to black critiques of U.S. internal colonialism by exploring Zora Neale Hurston's use of the book of Ezekiel in her *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). In part, the novel

portrays a showdown between two preachers: John “Buddy” Pearson, the main character, and a preacher brought in in an attempt to oust John, Felton Cozy. In the showdown, John preaches his “far famed” Dry Bones sermon (a sermon type, famous in the African American community, that is based on Ezekiel 37 and its “Valley of Dry Bones” episode), leaving the congregation in ecstasy and awe as a result of his performance. Later, Cozy preaches a sermon that is not based on a biblical text but offers a pseudo-scientific, rational account of Jesus’ life that one congregant calls a “lecture,” leaving the congregation unmoved and confused (159). While both preachers offer a form of black nationalism, the church clearly prefers John’s style to Cozy’s.

As I demonstrate, the book of Ezekiel and the account of the Dry Bones sermon genre help illuminate Hurston’s position on black leadership and racial uplift for post-Reconstruction blacks living under what could be viewed as U.S. domestic imperialism. Hurston suggests within the novel that John Pearson’s style of preaching fuses with black religious traditions to forge a superior black nationalism that can protect and unify a nation. As Deborah Plant explains, Hurston, “in her reclamation and celebration of African American folklore [...] often expressed her ideas in sermonic form and through the voice of the folk preacher—the very embodiment of African American folk tradition—as a way “to incite resistance to European cultural hegemony” (93). Pearson’s words, and the power of his performance, offer the same promise to his listeners as the “dry bones” chapter in Ezekiel offers its readers. The black preacher’s power to raise people to life comes through his spoken words. This vocal power, as originally displayed in Ezekiel, can also shape the people into an “exceeding great army” that will once again form a powerful collective. In turning to the Dry Bones sermon at a crucial moment in the narrative, then, John is preaching about what preachers do—he is reminding his congregation of just how important an effective preacher is. And he’s reminding them not just with his inspired

performance but with his choice of a sermon that takes as its subject precisely this sort of inspiring power, the power to reanimate the dry bones of a beleaguered people with the voice alone.

The nexus of identity, nation, and the Bible has been a powerful force in the U.S. cultural imaginary. This nexus has been used to justify imperialism, national expansion, and the nativist mistreatment of racial or ethnic others. In addition to those from within the dominant group, the Bible has also been used by racial others to counter imperial power and righteousness by turning scriptural texts back against the ruling classes. The Judeo-Christian scriptures feature stories of national and personal identity formation within a background of unfolding historical and spiritual crises. The national story told in “The Books of the Kingdoms” includes individual heroes acting and shaping national events, the growth and ascendance of a nation experiencing divine blessing and guidance, and, ultimately, a warning about the fate of nations that are unable to maintain their covenant relationship with God. Book, nation, and story sometimes combined to fuse a nation and a people in a common bond and sometimes offered a basis for the critique of just such bonds. By the nineteenth century, however, when kingdoms had by and large given way to empires, the Bible has become also a book about empire, enlisted both to justify imperial designs and, on occasion, to critique them. “Book of Empire: The Political Bible of U.S. Literary Modernism” explores the seminal relationship between religious scripture, modernist authorship, and nations as it played out during the rise of the United States from fledgling nation to world power. The Bible served U.S. literary modernists like Cather, Faulkner, Hurston, and others as a key political and ideological (not just aesthetic) resource that was more than just grist for the mill of the mythical method.

Endnotes

¹ Passages such as Psalm 18, Luke 12, Jeremiah 3, 58, Hosea 2-6, Canticles 6, Isaiah 60, 61, 65, and 66, and Revelation 12, 20, and 21 (Bercovitch 223).

² The U.S. South, in fact, long looked upon Cuba as a way to extend its plantation, slave-holding culture and influence (Guterl 15, 17, 27).

³ See George Marsden's *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, and *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

⁴ Not all religious modernists rejected the central tenets of Christianity, however. Many, like Shailer Matthews, Dean of Divinity at the University of Chicago, held to traditional beliefs but, "given the great changes that had come over the Western world in the preceding century [...] felt that these hereditary Christian doctrines need to be reinterpreted and reapplied if Christianity were to survive" (Noll 375).

⁵ In church leadership, and in traditional denominations, the modernists would emerge victorious, with the fundamentalists seemingly defeated. However, the fundamentalists would return in newly formed denominations, and, ironically, would benefit from the modern technologies of radio, television and print media reaching audiences and keeping their membership tightly connected (Marsden 171, 195).

⁶ Even though these biographical sketches are published after Bryan's speeches (and the novels in my study), I place Buck before Bryan since most of the events in her parents' lives she describes happened before Bryan's political commentary. Moreover, though Buck does not use the Bible as a means of critique, she points out the impact of messianic missionary imperialism on its missionaries and the Chinese.

⁷ Berman notes this too in his exploration of modernity, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, as he discusses the foundational importance of Goethe's *Faust*. Berman points out that Faust is upset with the way Mephistopheles uses underhanded methods to rid an area of unwanted people after Faust told Mephistopheles he wanted them removed. Mephistopheles then invokes the story of Naboth's vineyard to suggest "that there is nothing new about Faust's acquisition policy: the narcissistic will to power, most rampant in those who are most powerful, is the oldest story in the world" (68). Bryan's connection likewise suggests that the messianic rhetoric used to justify U.S. involvement overseas will become little more than a narcissistic will to power akin to Naboth's (and Faust's).

⁸ Evidence of modernist desire for the secular is abundant. For instance, Virginia Woolf commented upon Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism that since he now "believes in God and immortality, and goes to church," she is "really shocked." She then suggests a "corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God" (in Lewis "Modernism and Religion," *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* 178). Woolf's disdain seems to indicate a betrayal by Eliot. He is no longer like her and her cadre in his thinking, seemingly offering evidence of a godless modernist culture revolted by religion and religious expression.

⁹ Lewis' letter to E. K. Brown is torn in two and the two halves are housed in different archival collections. My bibliographical entries reflect this.

¹⁰ Jessie McGuire Coffee's *Faulkner's Un-Christlike Christians: Biblical Allusions in the Novels* covers most allusions to scripture in Faulkner's work.

II. "HE NOT JESUS": WILLA CATHER'S CRITIQUE OF U.S. PROTESTANT NATIVISM AND IMPERIALISM IN *MY ÁNTONIA*

Using the Bible to critique empire is a familiar tactic within the Cather family. Franc Cather—Willa Cather's aunt—corresponded with her nephew (and Willa's cousin) R. B. Payne, a foot soldier who served in the Philippine conflict from 1898-1899. In his letters to Franc, Payne presents a scathing critique of the U.S. mission in the Philippines. His letters become more bitter as his war experience progresses, and he confronts his own role not only in expanding the U.S. empire but in killing others in the name of empire-building. In one letter dated February 20, 1898, Payne sarcastically writes:

This is a noble course in which we fight! A war for humanity's sake! Poor Filipinos struggling for liberty & independence under Spanish misrule were ready to drink their cup running over with joy when their would be deliverers snatch it from their very lips. Oh yes, the U.S. needs a coaling station in the far east, yes needs a foothold there. Wants to get the Carolines [islands], hold the Ladrones, the Hawaiian islands, thus controlling the entire Pacific and the European trade that is about to be on that vast ocean. So what does the paltry liberty of a few dark colored people amount to if it falls in the road of Uncle Sam's schemes. If this policy wont kill the Republican Party if it pursues it as a party, God pity the country. (George Cather Ray Collection, February 20, 1898)

Payne clearly understands the strategic mission to create naval bases and trade outposts in the Pacific. For Payne, the Philippine conflict is not about humanitarian uplift so much as pure and simple greed—a land grab to expand U.S. military and economic influence abroad. Seeing the avarice of empire and the empty rhetoric of messianic uplift, exemplified during the Spanish-American War and Philippine conflict, Payne asks some damning questions of what he imagines is a betrayal: “But where is the First Republic of Asia? Who can answer where is thy brother Abel? If republics were judged as men what would be the judgment of the U.S.” Here, Payne evokes the sibling rhetoric that had become part of the vocabulary of empire, as in Governor-General William Howard Taft’s description of the Filipinos as the nation’s “little brown brother[s]” (in Miller 134). Payne views the U.S. not as its brother’s keeper, but instead, like Cain, as a murderer of fellow human beings. Payne recognizes that the U.S. will not soon allow the Philippines (or other colonial possessions) to become sovereign nations as they might if the conflict were truly about uplift and bringing civilization to others.

He then invokes God’s judgment, with an imagined answer suggesting that the U.S. would come under condemnation. Payne presciently continues, “Cuba will be annexed as well as the Philippines unless the people awake suddenly in their strength & show the world they mean what they say they start [sic] a war for humanity’s sake. Many an economic writer has eulogized this new principle in national law warring for humanity’s sake.” Here, Payne’s bitterness continues. War cannot be carried out “for humanity’s sake,” he realizes. This disillusionment with the U.S. messianic mission in the Pacific leads an exasperated Payne to confess to Aunt Franc that he is “no longer a Christian” (George Cather Ray Collection, February 20, 1898). By 1899, Payne’s disillusionment is so acute that he mockingly calls the conflict a “burlesque war”

in which all traces of humanitarian effort have gone and, instead, “our trade interests demand the seizure of the Philippines and the almighty dollar rules.” He then wonders if it matters that “the Filipino heart beats for liberty & love of country? What is the living that he sees his fields laid waste & his houses burned by a foreign foe?” The answer, Payne suggests in his final letter, is that calling the Filipino “a savage!” simply “covers a multitude of sins” (George Cather Ray Collection, April 3, 1899).

Likewise, Willa Cather uses the Bible to critique empire in her novel *My Ántonia*. While there is no direct evidence that Cather and Aunt Franc directly discussed Payne, they did have an active correspondence themselves as well as an active conversational relationship that may have included commentary on Payne. Either way, one of Cather’s relatives was directly involved in empire-building as well as in the critique of empire—a critique based at times in religious language. Cather seemingly understood this family milieu, as a biblical critique of empire also exists within *My Ántonia*. In the novel, she weaves empire, nation-building, and religious language into the culture and family life of her protagonist, Jim Burden, and the Burden family to represent typical Anglo-Protestants. Her representation, however, is an ironic portrayal of Protestant culture, and her novel becomes a critique of so-called messianic imperialism—a belief in the nation’s special mission as a standard-bearer of civilization, uplift, and spiritual salvation to other people and in the world. Through Jim Burden’s identity formation and imperialist actions, as well as the Burdens’ inability to save the less fortunate, Cather undermines messianic imperialism in *My Ántonia* as Payne similarly criticizes the U.S. mission in the Philippines.

The figures of Jim Burden and the Burden family are then key in understanding Cather’s critique within the novel. Jim Burden is a character invested in book, narrative, and story as a way of shaping his identity and interpreting national events. In fact, the conceit of *My Ántonia* is

Jim's written story of *Ántonia* and their experiences growing up in the frontier Nebraskan prairie after he and the frame narrator each decide to write about *Ántonia*, a "central figure" in their lives. The novel is Jim's recollections about his youth, growing up, and coming into maturity as they played out in Nebraska and New York. Not only does Jim conflate his experiences with *Ántonia* Shimerda and other pioneers; book, narrative, and story get conflated with nationhood and identity formation for him as well. Early in the novel he describes his interest in "The Life of Jesse James," *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Robinson Crusoe*—adventure tales of misplaced persons whom Jim identifies with given his own alienation and having to remake his life in new and different surroundings as he is forced from his familiar Virginia home to the unfamiliar landscape of the Nebraskan prairie after his parents' death. For example, Jesse James is living out a new life in the West as an ex-Confederate, the Swiss Family Robinson adapts to their situation on an island in the East Indies and, of course, Robinson Crusoe must forge a life for himself on an island off the South American coast. These tales also tell the story of imperialism as the characters seek to transform their new surroundings into those of their familiar homeland. Jim's connection to narrative, nation, and identity formation is most explicitly seen in the novel when he goes to college and identifies with the Italian poet Virgil—epic poets are traditionally seen as poets of the nation. Jim dreams of being able to "bring the muse into my country" in the same way Virgil brought his "patria" to the Italian countryside (190). Once again, Jim approaches the power of the written word and story as a stand-in for the nation and identity, connecting the local to the nation writ large. In *My Ántonia*, then, the local story of Jim Burden and his experience of pioneer-era Nebraska is a national story. What is happening on the Nebraskan plains in the late nineteenth century is a microcosm for the nation. Even the subject of his written reminiscences, *Ántonia*, gets conflated with story and nation. For him and the

unnamed frame narrator, she, “more than any other person we remembered, [...] seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood” (48). In this way, Jim is telling the story of the settlement of the West and the immigrant experience therein as analogous to the story of the developing U.S. of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Even though Jim focuses upon *Ántonia* as his muse to tell this story, Jim himself also means the country—his story is also the story of the emergence of the United States from local to global power.

Jim’s narrative, however, is not a story of the immigrant experience but of the dominant Anglo-Americans’ role in the development of the North American continent and beyond. The adventure stories Jim delights in during his youth are not the only stories prevalent in shaping his identity formation or his sense of national development: the Bible also figures prominently in Jim’s personality and sense of national destiny. The adult Jim tells of his interest in the Book of Kings and of his Grandfather Burden’s reading of Psalm 47 on the boy’s first night in Nebraska. These biblical allusions represent the Burdens’ Anglo-Protestantism as justifying westward expansion and imperialism through a divinely mandated messianic imperialism. As another marker of their investment in Protestant culture, the Burdens read the popular didactic novel *The Prince of the House of David* (1855)—a type of popular religious publication common in Anglo-Protestant culture of the era.¹ In these biblical connections, the Burdens represent the typical U.S. Protestant belief in the special role the United States has to play in world history. My contention is that these biblical references critique the imperialism and nativism formulated by a white-dominated U.S. Protestantism. What follows, then, is an exploration first of Psalm 47 as that intertext illuminates U.S. messianic imperialism. I follow that with discussion of *Prince*—even though Ingraham’s novel gestures towards the New Testament—since I read Cather’s inclusion

of *Prince* as an extension of the direct critique of U.S. messianic imperialism initiated by her allusion to Psalm 47. My commentary on Kings takes up the separate issue of U.S. nativism, an ideology sometimes born from imperialism.

Psalm 47, U.S. Imperialism, and Western Development

Through their imagined connection to ancient Israel, many U.S. Protestants believed in “Manifest Destiny” and messianic imperialism. These Protestants analogously framed their contemporary experiences with the history of ancient Israel depicted in the Hebrew Bible, where a “chosen people” entered a “promised land.” Pro-imperialists argued that the U.S., like ancient Israel, had a divine right and a God-ordained role to acquire territory. They also argued this messianic imperialism would beneficially uplift “savages” from darkness into light. This sentiment was prevalent in some missionaries’ thinking as well. David Healy writes that missionaries felt a sense of cultural superiority to other cultures “precisely because they were Christian,” and missionaries thought “Christianity was the essential condition for creating any truly advanced society, anywhere. Western, Christian civilization had therefore not only the right but the duty to attack the very foundations of the non-Christian societies” (135). For such missionaries—functioning as a vanguard of imperialistic activity—nationalism, imperialism, and Christianity were intrinsically linked. Missionaries, however, were not the only Protestants linking nationhood and special mission. Martin Marty argues that U.S. Protestants more generally sought to “evangelize the world.” This Protestant mission “was the great goal of empire.” Indeed, “[c]lergymen, fund-raisers, foreign missionaries, heads of benevolent societies, revivalists, and circuit-riders were the new heroes of kingdom and empire” (53). Thus, messianic

imperialism touched on all levels of society, creating a sense of militarism in the populace as the process of nation-building carried a sense of martial enterprise (Blum 220). Even if not missionaries, for instance, U.S. Protestants could participate in this special mission by helping missionary societies and participating in domestic religious programs that fostered U.S. interests abroad. In *My Ántonia*, the Burdens are connected with Christian missionaries, and thus with potential empire building and cultural transformation in this vein. Right before recounting Grandfather's reading of psalms, Jim notes that "I once heard a missionary say [Grandfather's beard] was like the beard of an Arabian sheik" (56). This personal remark seems to suggest the Burdens have a familiarity with missionaries and their fundraising endeavors that points indirectly towards imperialistic ventures. In likening Grandfather Burden to an "Arabian Sheik," too, this missionary associates Mr. Burden with royalty, land, and wealth. The close connection in the novel between Jim's comments and Grandfather's reading of psalms, then, deepens the connection between missionary activity, scripture, and empire.

Just as his early connection to the Bible shapes his identity, Jim Burden's connection to Kings and the Burdens' interest in Psalm 47 also illustrate this phenomenon. This can be seen, too, in Grandfather Burden's prayer life. Jim recounts that "Grandfather's prayers were often very interesting. He had the gift of simple and moving expression. Because he talked so little, his words had a peculiar force; they were not worked dull from constant use. His prayers," Jim continues, "reflected what he was thinking about at the time, and it was chiefly through them that we got to know his feelings and his views about things" (96). The Burdens link their sense of nation with sacred texts and spiritual practice in order to find guidance, parallels, and wisdom for their contemporary experience in both their personal interpretation of national events and their sense of citizenship. In doing so, they typify Susan K. Harris' argument that Bible readers of the

era “fused lessons in Christian piety to national identity” (109). The lesson that the Burdens impart, and that Jim seems readily to accept and participate in, seems similar to the sense of special mission inherent in U.S. history and culture.

The psalms are an important text in this phenomenon, not only for Anglo-Protestants but for ancient Israel, because the Book of Psalms represents the collected history of Israel and was used in corporate celebration and individual instruction. As a collection, the Book of Psalms bore “witness to the centrality that Psalms had come to enjoy in national consciousness by the time of the Second Temple,” argues Robert Alter (“Psalms” 246). Many of the psalms were specifically commissioned by and for special writers in the Temple—the symbolic site of spiritual-political culture for ancient Israel. Moreover, this collection rooted in Israel’s “national consciousness” remained “stylistically conservative” in as much as a “densely continuous literary tradition, evolving very slowly over the centuries” (245), pervaded Psalms. As such, the inclusion speaks to continuation, a genre invested in a resistance to change for the sake of forming and keeping a national identity. Writing on the fact that many psalms are attributed to King David, Northrop Frye points out that it “is not hard to understand why David became the traditional author of most of the Psalms” since King David is symbolic of Israel’s religious, militaristic, and national attributes. The psalms, writes Frye, become a national liturgy that “expresses the unity of the group by the metaphor of the individual” (90). Additionally, Tremper Longman III notes that “the psalmist could express the reader’s feelings in a way far better than the reader could. In this way the psalms articulate [the reader’s] feelings and become a model prayer” that give the “words by which we may address God.” Ultimately, the “reader feels an immediacy with the psalmist and his emotional expression that is different from that of most other parts of the Bible.” Therefore, the “psalmists wrote with the hope that others would use their compositions to

express their own feelings before the Lord. The psalms themselves encapsulate human experience but subdue historical reference in such a way that the psalm is transferrable to others. The psalms easily become the mirrors of the reader's soul" (252). The psalms as collected poems, prayers, and writings to God are thus powerful tools in formulating and promoting cultural and individual identity, a "mirror" into the Anglo-Protestant Burdens' souls. Grandfather Burden, then, uses the psalms to educate Jim into the white-Protestant U.S. ethos of the nineteenth century so that he too may participate in and carry on the national culture.

Thus, on Jim's first night in Nebraska, the then ten-year-old Jim is called into the living room before bed. There his grandfather says nightly prayers and "put[s] on silver-rimmed spectacles and read[s] several Psalms" (57). Jim finds his grandfather's reading captivating; in particular, he recounts, "I was awed by his intonation of the word 'Selah.' *'He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom He loved. Selah'*" (57). Taken by his grandfather's scripture reading, Jim laments that "he was so sympathetic and he read so interestingly that I wished he had chosen one of my favorite chapters in the Book of Kings" (57). Instead, Jim (and Cather) shares Psalm 47:4 as a representative example of Grandfather Burden's readings that night. While the presented verse itself does not directly speak to imperialism, the whole of Psalm 47 lauds imperialism, celebrating a time when all people will be brought under God's rule by Israel. The psalm also includes imperial language that champions a monolithic Jewish state through which God will reign over all the nations of the earth. Even though the whole psalm is not shared in the actual text, the whole psalm is read that evening and is the psalm specifically chosen as the representative sample of all the psalms Grandfather Burden reads that first night. Here is the whole of the psalm:

O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph / For the LORD most high is terrible; he is a great King over all the earth / He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet / He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom he loved. Selah / God is gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet / Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises / For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding / God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness / The princes of the people are gathered together, even the people of the God of Abraham: for the shields of the earth.

The Psalmist dreams of a time when everyone will be united under the banner of the Hebrew nation and Jewish religion, reminding all nations that the Jewish way of life is where the true God resides; that whatever their beliefs, Yahweh is “King over all the earth” and “He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet”; and that “God reigneth over the heathen.” The particular sample of Psalm 47 (and specifically verse four) seems to suggest a purposeful inclusion on Cather and Jim’s part. Psalm 47 may be a way for Cather to illustrate the Burdens’ worldview, allowing a glimpse into the underlying ethos of their actions and beliefs. This ethos is grounded in the biblically based education they want to impart to Jim as a teaching moment whereupon he learns the ways of a national religion intent on empire-building and cultural hegemony.

Just as Psalm 47 celebrates a Jewish spiritual-political state, the Burdens gravitate toward militaristic notions of U.S. Protestantism. In “subduing” the “nations under our feet” as the King and the “princes of the people” “gather together” to presumably display the pomp and panoply of their military exploits, the militaristic elements in Psalm 47 illustrate this connection. After this

total military victory, the Hebrews are the undisputed rulers of the earth—they have no peer or equal. They are free to rule as one people, one religion, under one God without competition or critique. All the subordinate people must look to Israel as their rulers and their source of protection and spirituality in the psalm's conceit. Hence, Grandfather Burden's use of the psalms themselves is important for a discussion of imperialism since not only does Psalm 47 address internal expansion, but it also speaks to U.S. imperialism and its complications through the connections obliquely evoked within the novel to the Spanish-American War. Cather's gesture towards the Spanish-American War in *My Ántonia* points to the historical situation, one she likely knew well through her time at the *Pittsburgh Leader*. In fact, Cather even remarked that "newspapers were puffing up the war news to create reader interest" (in O'Connor 59). Given that the Spanish-American war would become a sort of test-run for future global conflicts that vaulted the U.S. into super-power status, Cather's potential critique in the novel of this war suggests a layer of underlying trouble within the U.S. national story. U.S. political and cultural rhetoric during the Spanish-American War justified conquest and internal control as a God-directed, divine mandate like Israel's special mission.

This so-called messianic imperialism created a chosen-people mentality that masked the reality of imperial conquest. Since the U.S. is (and was) an empire, and, as Joseph Urgo writes, "Americans don't talk about their empire" (132), Psalm 47 allows Cather an embedded way to discuss contemporary and historical forms of imperialism within *My Ántonia*. These embedded discussions center mostly upon the Spanish-American War, but also allude to conflicts with the Plains Indians. Critics rightly point out Jim's intentional silences about Native-American history but argue that these silences are not Cather's own blindness, but that Cather presents an ironic Jim who is reluctant to talk about these inconvenient issues within his tale.² The novel also hints

at Spanish exploration of the U.S. middle-west as a form of colonialism and adds a few oblique references to the Spanish-American War itself. For instance, Jim and his friend Charley Harling discuss Spanish colonization as well as Harling's entry into the naval academy at Annapolis (Urgo's edited edition points out that Harling would be a junior officer during the Spanish-American War). As such, Jim is surrounded by physical reminders of colonialism, and his personal investments promote forms of external and internal expansion as well. Not only are Jim's parents devoted to national development, but Jim's principal male friend is also linked to territorial growth via military conquest—especially through the nation's burgeoning naval expansion that needed colonial possessions for refueling stations and bases, just as Payne's letters suggest. Moreover, *My Ántonia* is a tale of westward expansion and manifest destiny. Jim's grandparents are successful pioneers in the Nebraska territory, Jim himself is able to fund and profit from industrial ventures in Montana and Wyoming, and several of the "hired girls"—the young immigrant girls who initially find work as economically exploited domestics in the U.S. born pioneers' homes—find monetary success in San Francisco, Seattle, and Alaska during the 1896-1899 Klondike gold rush.

Thus, the presence of the Spanish-American War is another way the novel handles issues of national expansion and development. The newly acquired territories of Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines were the subject of much political debate during and after the Spanish-American War. The debate also examined what the U.S. should do with people "over there." How could the nation justify territorial acquisition beyond the contiguous U.S.? Messianic imperialists argued that U.S. political, military, and cultural action could "save" and "uplift" native people in need of civilizing. In fact, "when the United States went to war against the Spanish Empire in 1898," writes Blum, "white Protestants were some of the most rabid jingoists. They hailed the war as the

Lord's way of solidifying post-Civil War national solidarity" (16). President McKinley captured this messianic rhetoric in an interview speaking about the Philippines. He noted that when "the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confess I did not know what to do with them [...] I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance" (quoted in Harris vii). McKinley suggested that this divine guidance led him to conclude that he could not give the territories back to Spain or to any other imperial power. Since the Filipinos were "unfit for self-government," McKinley wanted "to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died" (quoted in Harris 14). McKinley's confessional rhetoric combines his executive power as President with prayer in seeking divine guidance and expressing his political views, much as Josiah Burden makes prayer a measure of how he feels about contemporary situations. McKinley's point here is the epitome of U.S. messianic imperialism: that in watching over the Philippines, the U.S. can provide uplift, civilization, and Christianity to a "savage" people. In so doing, the nation would fulfill the "imperialists' belief that the mighty impulse of the Anglo-Saxon race—now at the meridian of its strength—had driven America forth to conquer and redeem." Conveniently, the Filipinos "tended to figure among the lesser breeds whom the Anglo-Saxon was dedicated to uplift" (Higham 105).

However, Cather uses the Burdens' failure to provide adequate charity to the Shimerdas during their times of need to demonstrate U.S. Protestants' inability even to "save" the foreign people in their midst through internal colonization. While the Shimerdas do not represent a directly colonized people, they provide a sense of otherness in contrast to the Burdens since they are Catholics (an enemy religion to many white nineteenth-century Protestants) and bring an air

of urbane culture with them that stands in stark contrast with the culture of the agrarian Nebraska prairie.³ They also represent the proverbial “white man’s burden” ideas in turn-of-the-century imperialist rhetoric—and represent it for and to the “Burden” family. In this way, they offer the sharpest critique of the Burdens and U.S. Protestantism—a Protestantism that Harris maintains held “a profound belief in the superiority of U.S. political and social institutions and a conviction that the United States had a divine mandate to help other countries follow its examples” (5). Hence, “to be American was to be white and Protestant” (60). These U.S. citizens “took white supremacy for granted, regarded Catholics as dangerous aliens, and taught their children that American Civil Liberties were invented during the Protestant Reformation” (7). Harris argues that the Protestant Reformation and a sense of U.S. identity are linked for Gilded Age Anglo-Americans, once again conflating national identity with Christianity. As cultured Catholics, however, the Shimerdas serve as a counterpoint to the Burdens’ Protestantism. Even though they are economically disadvantaged, they are not without culture or a sense of national identity. They do not need to be saved or be brought into the light of civilization; they just need an economic and social boost upon their arrival in Nebraska. This failure to understand the immigrants’ need shows that Anglo-Protestants are wrong to think that people like the Shimerdas need the dominant culture and civilization. Instead, simple charity and neighborliness would serve them far better. For the Shimerdas, the Burdens’ charity turns out to be only nominally helpful. This “profound belief” in U.S. cultural markers that the Burdens seem to typify is thus a mistaken notion. In fact, the Burdens’ saving power is critiqued through two particular episodes that illustrate the family’s failure to help those in need. In refusing to actually help the Shimerdas in their plight, the Burdens fail to uplift those they are supposed to help, calling into question the supposed superiority claimed by white U.S. Protestants.

Guy Reynolds highlights how incorporating immigrant culture into the dominant culture helped create U.S. identity. For instance, Jim's interest in the word "Selah," illustrates his acceptance of foreign words, noting how these influences become acclimated into the majority. Reynolds writes, "Cather shows how a commonplace devotion, a cornerstone of Protestant daily life, turns on a word that is unknown" (82), further suggesting that "domestic religious life is made strange and made sacred by the admission of the foreign. Cather elliptically reminds us that American Protestantism inevitably incorporated elements of that 'alien' culture with hard-line Americanisation [sic] rhetoric" (82). I would additionally suggest that this co-opting incorporates the foreign into the U.S. ethos as a way of dominating the foreign, just as Psalm 47 is about cultural homogenization—a biblical justification for co-opting foreign people that the Hebrew nation sought to do in its own history. Instead of incorporating the foreign, Josiah simply "colonizes" the word by taking "Selah" into the American lexicon as if its foreignness does not matter.

This co-opting can be better seen when Mr. Shimerda makes the sign of the cross as he comes into the Burden home at Christmastime. Though the gesture seems strange to the Burdens, Mr. Burden accepts it but offers his own pronouncement over the festivities after Grandmother Burden becomes nervous about Mr. Shimerda's act. Jim says his grandfather "was rather narrow in religious matters, and sometimes spoke out and hurt people's feelings," but after Mr. Shimerda's act, "Grandfather merely put his finger-tips to his brow and bowed his venerable head, thus Protestantizing the atmosphere" (97). As such, Grandfather Burden attempts to handle cultural differences by allowing them to exist but advancing Protestant norms as the final word over the foreign. Mr. Burden thus "colonizes" the gathering through an appeal to dominant cultural values, thus suggesting how the dominant culture can handle the diverse elements

infiltrating the U.S. by assimilating linguistic foreignness to English and religious foreignness to Protestantism. Josiah Burden does not re-introduce centuries-old European religious conflict; instead he offers an example of how the U.S. culture emerging on the plains will tolerate other religious practices as long as they can be “Protestantized” by the forerunning white Protestant pioneers.

Soon after this scene, Mr. Shimerda succumbs to depression and the pressures of his new life and commits suicide. He is unhappy with the rural aspects of life in Nebraska as he does not have an outlet for his musical talents or the sophisticated conversation he is used to in Bohemia. Many churches refuse to allow his burial in their cemeteries, and the family has trouble finding a Catholic priest who will offer prayers for the deceased. They do find a Bohemian, Anton Jelinek, who offers some explanation of the Shimerdas’ plight with the church. In discussing the need for a priest as intercessor, Grandfather Burden and Jelinek talk about the theological differences between Catholics and Protestants. “Will they be much disappointed because we cannot get a priest?” (107) asks Mr. Burden. Jelinek, described as a “strapping young fellow” who is “full of life” (106), responds with a “serious” look and says the Shimerdas’ situation is “very bad for them. Their father has done a great sin” (107). Mr. Burden agrees but adds, “we believe that Mr. Shimerda’s soul will come to its Creator as well off without a priest. We believe that Christ is our only intercessor” (107). Here, Mr. Burden attempts to triumph over the Catholic stance of ecclesiastical intercession on behalf of the dead by asserting Protestant theology over Catholic theology, again “Protestantizing” the scene. Unlike the Christmas scene, however, the Catholic Jelinek gets the last word, resisting Burden’s efforts: “I know how you think. My teacher at the school has explain. But I have seen too much. I believe in prayer for the dead. I have seen too much” (107). Jelinek resists Josiah Burden’s assertion of Protestant theology over an “other.” He

then explains that his war experience in the Austro-Prussian War led to his beliefs in the efficacy of prayer for the dead. After Jelinek's story, Jim remarks that it was "impossible not to admire his frank, manly faith," and Mr. Burden says he is glad to "meet a young man who thinks seriously about these things" and that he "would never be the one to say you were not in God's care when you were among the soldiers" (107). Mr. Burden seems to be temporarily thwarted by Jelinek here in attempting to assert the primacy of Protestantism over Catholicism, yet seems to retain a messianic imperialist mindset nevertheless.

The Jacob and Esau Story and U.S. Treatment of Native Americans

Jim's specific focus on Jacob is another telling detail that exposes the Burdens' imperialism. In fact, through Psalm 47:4 the novel obliquely deals with Native Americans and the story of U.S. westward expansion.⁴ The verse mentions the Hebrew people's "inheritance" precisely in connection with Jacob's "excellency." What is left out, however, is that Jacob got his inheritance by exchanging a simple bowl of pottage for his twin brother's birthright. In Genesis, Esau came into their dwelling famished to the point of exhaustion as a result of his daily hunting. Jacob made the red pottage prior to his brother's return, perhaps as a premeditated way of tricking his brother, since their rivalry went back to the womb. Esau seems to fear that he may die of hunger and sells his birthright to Jacob for the pottage. Jacob makes it a point to have Esau swear to the transaction, making the transfer legally binding. Biblical scholar Geoffrey Miller points out that "many of these rules [of ancient Near-East contracts] appear harsh and even unjust. The Jacob-Esau story, for example, seems to carry the message that a contract for sale is valid and enforceable even if made under conditions of extreme inequality of bargaining power" (24). Moreover, Jacob later tricks his father, Isaac, into thinking that is he is Esau, gaining the

fatherly blessing that should have gone to Esau by virtue of being first born, just as the birthright should have gone to Esau.

The story of Jacob and Esau highlights the rivalry of a set of twins, brothers that represent national groups. “Two nations are in thy womb,” the Lord declares in the Genesis text to Rebekah, their mother (Genesis 25:23). The emphasis on Jacob and Esau as national symbols is so overt, argues Robert Alter, that the story “virtually asks us to read it as a political allegory.” In fact, the reader should “construe each of the twins as an embodiment of his descendants’ national characteristics, and to understand the course of their struggle as an outline of their future national destinies” (49). Jacob will become “Israel,” the literal namesake of the Jewish nation, while Esau, despite the criticism he receives from commentators, goes on to become the wealthy founder of the Edomites. The “national characteristics” and “future national destinies” they embody point to a textual preference for Jacob. Esau is the hunter and a man of the field, disparagingly described with red skin like a hairy garment. Conversely, Jacob is a “plain man” (Genesis 25:27) who dwells in tents. What is not stated here, however, is Jacob’s shrewd insight into law and governance, his foresight and his ruthlessness. For these qualities he is praised as the namesake of the Jewish nation invested in law and destiny—like the supposed Anglo-Saxon gift for sovereignty and governance.

Most Jewish and Christian commentators (including Paul in Romans) justify Jacob’s actions and blame Esau for his foolish choices.⁵ For them, Esau sold his birthright too cheaply; he is too ruled by momentary passions and impulses to be fit to become the progenitor of a chosen people. Alter maintains that “Esau is not spiritually fit to be the vehicle of divine election, the bearer of the birthright of Abraham’s seed,” since Esau “is altogether too much the slave of the moment and of the body’s tyranny to become the progenitor of the people promised by divine

covenant to have a vast historical destiny to fulfill” (52). Jacob, on the other hand, “is a man who thinks about the future, indeed, who often seems worried about the future, and we shall repeatedly see him making prudent stipulations in legal or quasi-legal terms” (52). Jacob’s insistence on legality, planning, and forethought of action in his dealings (or deception) of Esau reveals the cunning qualities necessary in shaping a nation with a divine purpose. These attributes qualify him “as a suitable bearer of the birthright,” writes Alter, because “historical destiny does not just happen; you have to know how to make it happen, how to keep your eye on the distant horizon of present events” (52).

However, some readers argue that the Jacob and Esau story depicts a more complex set of relationships between the brothers and the “collision of national archetypes” (Alter 49) they are supposed to represent. Even with his calm demeanor, Alter suggests, Jacob’s “quality of wary calculation does not necessarily make Jacob more appealing as a character and, indeed, may even raise some moral questions about him” (52). James Bangsund suggests that “Esau may be depicted as a bumptious bumpkin and not overly bright in Genesis 25, but in Genesis 27 he is simply treated shabbily, and the reader knows it” (175). Colvin Jones, too, concludes that “[u]nder almost any system of belief, Jacob is deceitful—at best a wily hero like Odysseus, at worst, a lying con man or a fairy-tale villain” (54). In fact, the Hebrew name Jacob means “supplanter” or “usurper” (Jones 53), thus casting a suspicious light upon the origins of the Jewish people’s national namesake. So why then this tension? Why is the namesake of the Jewish people portrayed in such a light? Bangsund thinks the story leads the “reader to question whether this is seemly conduct for the foreparents of a chosen people” (175). Genesis seems to suggest that on “the popular level, the point of it all is [...] God’s selection of a bearer of promise, and his symmetrical rejection of the other (read ‘false’) contender.” For Bangsund, the

“stories of Isaac and Ishmael and of Jacob and Esau have often been given readings which emphasize the merit of the younger sons at the expense of the elder” (171). Bangsund (and other commentators, including Paul) argue that a divine promise is automatically upheld once the promise is given, even if gained on fraudulent terms. For these thinkers, God is bound to uphold His promises even if He might disapprove of Jacob’s actions. More troubling, however, is Alter’s suggestion that the “authors and redactor of the Jacob story were political subversives raising oblique but damaging questions about the national enterprise” (53). Here, the subversive qualities seem to suggest that the Jewish nation—this “excellency” of Jacob—is founded on fraught terms and deceitful dealings evocative of Anglo-American dealings with Native Americans inasmuch as white settlers were fraudulent latecomers who tricked their “brothers” out of their rightful inheritance / birthright and founded a nation upon the spoils.

The allusion to Jacob’s inheritance in Psalm 47:4 similarly seems to evoke this story of national rivalry, of the later-born getting the better of the first-born, all to suggest a similar story behind the development of the national interior of the United States. In this light, Jim’s account of westward expansion seems similar to the Jacob-Esau story. Jim, like white settler-colonists throughout U.S. history, simply supplants the original inhabitants and takes the mantle of blessing and inheritance as a given. While *My Ántonia* is unclear on how Josiah and Emmaline Burden acquired their land, they seem to be among the early pioneers around Black Hawk. (Red Cloud, NE, Cather’s inspiration for Black Hawk, opened to homesteaders in 1870 and the town itself was planned out in 1872.) They likely did not fight Native Americans directly; they certainly may have purchased their landholdings from a railroad company that may in turn have swindled native tribes in unfair contracts. Through this connection to Jacob’s supplanting of Esau, then, Jim operates in ways similar to those Michael Paul Rogin points out in the Jacob-

Esau drama. Rogin argues that the “conflict between Jacob and Esau enshrined for Bible-reading Americans the right of the farming brother to claim the inheritance of the hunter. The story of Jacob and Esau prefigured the history of America, but it hardly provided secure grounding for the justice of white claims” (126). In this way, I see Jim attempting to be a “bearer of promise” (Bangsund 171) to secure the “justice of white claims.” In fact, looking again at Jim’s interest in Virgil in bringing the muse into his country, Jim explains that Virgil did not refer to the capital, “the *palatia Romana*, but to his own little ‘country’; to his father’s fields” (190). Virgil’s point in the *Georgics* is that the local is the country, not the important figures living in grand palaces. Inspired by his mentor Gaston Cleric’s reading of the *Georgics*, Jim says that “I sat staring at my book. The fervor of his voice stirred through the quantities on the page before me” (190). While the passage is not explicit, the implication is that Jim wants his story of *Ántonia* to bring the Muse into the obscure Nebraska prairie in the same way Virgil champions the rural as the true symbolic marker of the nation. Even though he does not say so directly, Jim believes he, too, has a destiny, a fate to be a “bearer of promise” like Jacob in Genesis; Jim is therefore like Jacob in that he presents himself as the righteous, proper inheritor of the land despite the unsettling issues underlying the Jacob-Esau story and the story of the emerging country forming on the Nebraska “patria.”

Jim does not display Jacob’s trickery, but he is implicated in the westward migration that is supplanting native people, and, perhaps as an accomplice, acts for “one of the great western railways” (48) that were directly involved in the removal of Native Americans from the U.S. West. In fact, just as Jacob is versed in legality and legal precedent, Jim as legal consul for a railroad company would be so versed as well. The railroad companies often acquired territory through advantageous contracts and legal chicanery in their drive to unite the coasts and all

points in between, by rail. For instance, Richard White points out that the railroads' efforts to transform the West came to "epitomize progress, nationalism, and civilization itself" (xi). In their drive to advance civilization, "the transcontinentals and the federal government" by 1871 "were so intertwined on such a variety of levels that it was sometimes hard to distinguish whether particular people were acting in their capacity of government officials or because of their connections to the railroads" (60). To this end, the railroads sought to acquire territory from Native Americans at prices far below their value to white settlers. White settlers protested these actions, not because of any interest in social justice for Native Americans, but because they knew the railroads would exploit them with higher prices later on. For example, acting without governmental approval, James Joy—president of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroads—acquired from the Cherokees the "Neutral Tract" in Kansas for \$1 an acre and then later sold plots for \$5 to \$9.15 an acre to white settlers (White 60). While I am not suggesting that Jim himself does this, he is a member of a profession that has helped the railroads expand and advance by taking advantage of people in weaker negotiating positions, just as Jacob negotiates with an advantage over Esau. Miller argues of Jacob and Esau that "it is evident that the parties are shown as being in grossly unequal bargaining positions, and Jacob is portrayed as extracting compensation that far exceeds in objective value the value of the item he gives up" (24). The history of U.S. and Native American dealings could be seen in similar terms, and Jim represents that history, even if only in part.

Like Judeo-Christian theology's championing of Jacob at the expense of Esau, Jim, through his silences on the subject of Native Americans, seems to suggest that they, like Esau, are not worthy of their birthright; they have traded the landscape too cheaply. Jim, and his settler forbearers, are presumably worthy progenitors of the land and nation, however, since they can

see the potential and look into the future for development as Jacob does. This sentiment was the typical justification for removal of Native Americans: they did not “develop” the land in proper ways familiar to Anglo-Protestants. Francis Paul Prucha points out that “[f]ailure to cultivate the land in accord with the dictates of the Bible as interpreted by Whites of the time also justified joint occupation of the land with the Native American possessors, if not outright dispossession of the Indian” (544). U.S. Protestants viewed the “dictates of the Bible” and the dictates of English common law as favoring traditional agricultural societies linked with private property—or, what Jim calls the “material out of which countries are made” (54). Patricia Limerick continues this thought, showing that “the usual justification [for Indian removal] was that Indians were not using the land properly.” Instead, the reasoning went, Native Americans were “[r]elying on hunting and gathering, [and] savagery neglected the land’s true potential and kept out those who could put it to proper use.” In other words, a “sparse Indian population wasted the resources that could support a dense white population” (190). Limerick shows the duplicity in this type of rhetoric, which, she argues, “shifted the terms of greed and philanthropy: it was not that white people were greedy and mean-spirited; Indians were the greedy ones, keeping so much land to themselves; and white people were philanthropic and farsighted in wanting to liberate the land for its proper uses” (190). Just as red-skinned Esau was disavowed as a progenitor for a chosen people because of his appetites, Native Americans are similarly discounted. They did not deserve the birthright, settlers seemed to think, because they were not “farsighted” enough to create society on European models; they did not possess the qualities of a chosen people, so pioneers could rhetorically justify moving them aside since they themselves did possess those qualities—they are like the figures whom Marshall Berman points out as the “people who are in the way—in the way of history, of progress, of development; people who are classified, and disposed of, as

obsolete” (67).

Through an ironic portrayal of Jim, though, the novel raises questions about national development similar to those raised in Genesis about Jacob as the bearer of national identity and destiny. While Jim may not have directly tricked or usurped Native Americans, he is part of a cultural mindset that believes Native Americans to be unworthy predecessors of a nation-state just as many Judeo-Christians considered Esau to blame for selling his birthright too cheaply. Esau’s make up as hunter and his “red skin” also seem to suggest the physical characteristics of the “savage,” intemperate caricature of Native Americans by U.S. citizens. Cather’s inclusion of the specific verse of Psalm 47:4 hints at the unfair dealings that highlight the national destinies of Esau and Jacob, in turn evoking the national destinies of Native and Anglo-Americans. Cather in *My Ántonia*, like the “subversive” redactors of the Jacob story, suggests a potential critique of the United States’ national story. The novel critiques the idea of U.S. advancement as destiny, suggesting that the story is similarly built on fraught terms and deceitful dealings as the Jacob and Esau story.

Jim’s Inheritance and Internal Colonialism

Additionally, the connection between inheritance and colonialism in Psalm 47 is also an important tool the novel employs as a critique of U.S imperialism. The frame narrator implies that Jim’s inheritance seems to be wrapped up in promoting economic development and the extraction of natural resources in the West. Thus, Jim’s interest in the West is colonial by nature. Likewise, Thomas Bender argues that in developing the West, Anglo-Americans used “a semantic sleight of hand” as they “obscured their actual empire by describing it as ‘the westward movement’ or the ‘westward expansion’ of their country” so that “prior possession by Indians

and Mexicans was erased or denied” (183). For Bender, westward expansion is synonymous with empire since that movement displaces native inhabitants in the name of territorial expansion. Even if U.S. Protestants call westward migration a natural course of national destiny, the fact remains that the U.S. fought for or purchased land beyond the original thirteen colonies and did not simply move into empty landscape available for the taking. Similarly to the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, Psalm 47:4 suggests that God orchestrates what will happen to the nation of Israel and that whatever happens is thus divinely mandated.

Yet, the Jewish nation split over issues of proper religious practice, dividing the kingdom into northern and southern branches, Judah and Israel, respectively. Even after this division, the Jewish people’s inheritance was further troubled by the internal strife recorded in the Book of Kings and other places in the Hebrew Bible—an internal strife created, Kings suggests, because the Israelites did not properly manage and incorporate foreign elements but allowed those influences to corrupt them instead (events I will explore fully in the final section on Kings and U.S. nativism). Because the Hebrews were unable to hold to their particular religious practices and since they adulterated their national culture with foreign influences, punishment was meted out. This punishment, according to Israel’s own chroniclers, was ordained by God as a chastisement for Israel’s devotion to foreign religious practices. The Assyrians were the first to decimate Israel, taking the Northern Kingdom into bondage, culminating in the Babylonian captivity and ending Jewish sovereignty. The inheritance of Israel, the excellency of Jacob, did not last.

But what about Jim’s inheritance? Since Jim’s parents died, he is the sole heir to the seemingly considerable Burden holdings in Nebraska—a large farm and a single-family home in town—and likely inherits his parents’ land in Virginia as well. However, Jim is strangely silent

about his grandparents' fate and his inheritance. Since his coming of age tale is about his relationship to *Ántonia*, such commentary may not be appropriate. Yet, like Jim's missing discussions of Plains Indians, these moments are important barometers according to John T. Matthews. Through these silences, Matthews argues, Jim can "manage threats to his account instead of simply ignoring them." In this way, the "many disturbing features of America's success story [that] haunt Jim's pageant of national destiny" are obfuscated "into his text in conspicuously disguised form" (141). Susan Rosowski puts it this way: "Jim's allegiance is consistently to his ideals; when they conflict with reality, he denies reality" (89). Thus, the issues of inheritance raised by his recounting of Psalm 47:4 may indicate another of these intentional ellipses whereby he "denies reality." Jim perhaps cannot directly address how his inheritance is rooted in imperialism and capitalist ventures since this revelation might compromise his story and paint him in a negative light, but the allusion to Psalm 47:4 may be a leak to that end. Further, these silences seem to portray the type of U.S. culture one would get from a Jim Burden, or from any white Protestant invested in the national narrative of advancement and imperialism: a culture that would rather subordinate "others" and would use its sense of special mission for individual gain. In this way, the inheritance is not providing any spiritual uplift to disadvantaged people; it is only being used for personal profit, not to uplift the unfortunate or to advance God's purpose.

The exposure of Jim's vision of the U.S. can further be seen in how Jim's inheritance is wrapped up in natural resource extraction. For instance, the opening frame-narrator tells that Jim is wrapped up in "big Western dreams" as he helps young investors do wonderful things in "mines and timber and oil" (48). He further participates in environmental destruction through the cultivation of natural spaces, as well as the railroad's involvement in purposefully destroying the

bison population in the project of decimating Native-Americans. Prucha points out that General Sherman praised the railroads as essential in removing Native Americans from the West. Prucha writes that the “railroads, so emphasized by Sherman [...] speeded the destruction of the buffalo on the plains and thereby destroyed the Indians’ independence and ability to wage war” (561). On the foreign side of U.S. expansion, Jim has no qualms about his friend Charley Harling’s involvement in U.S. imperial activities in the Spanish-American War.

Jim’s empty personal life reveals the failure of his vision as well. Indeed, the last chapter notes that Jim’s final visit to Black Hawk was “disappointing” since “most of [his] old friends were dead or had moved away. Strange children, who meant nothing to [him], were playing in the Harlings’ big yard” (242). He neither spends time in the places familiar to him, nor at any family holdings. Jim has likely sold these properties as investment capital for those young men with “[b]ig Western dreams” that are grounded in the extraction of natural resources for profit. Even though he comments upon a former neighbor’s house, he says nothing about his former residence, or his grandparents’ farm, which at this point is certainly no longer inhabited by the elderly Widow Steavens. He could have visited those places if he had not sold them or if he knew the inhabitants. Instead, he spends the day at Anton Jelinek’s saloon, an acquaintance no doubt, but not someone dear to his story. Jim’s nostalgic reverie attempts to escape the pain of what might be called a mid-life crisis, but by the end of his tale he illustrates his disappointment and discontentment. Trapped in an unfulfilling marriage, ultimately distanced from the foreign people of the prairie, childless, Jim knows yet is silent about his hollow inheritance, an inheritance linked with imperial activities in the western U.S. Michael Gorman writes that “Jim’s frequent travels to the West are speculative in nature and rooted in colonialism” (30), so he escapes within his tale, hiding the pain of utilizing his inheritance in this way. He will not

become the U.S. equivalent of Virgil, nor will he become the nation's namesake as Jacob became Israel. Instead, the U.S. that Jim represents is one that readily displaces people inconvenient to national narratives of Manifest Destiny in which natural resources and people are cultivated and exploited for profit, not uplift. Jim is a successful lawyer who marries into money, but the capital he raises potentially stems from reinvesting his inheritance into colonial-industrial development of the U.S. interior and justifying this conquest with a quasi-spiritual sense of national destiny and progress rooted in U.S. Protestantism.

This sense of national destiny is also rooted in white U.S. Protestants' tendency to conflate the biblical past with contemporary events. Cather's use of Psalm 47 highlights how this conflation links the majority culture's desire for dominance over non-white, non-Protestant cultures. The psalm also reveals the U.S. messianic desire to unite all people under one banner just as the Psalmist desired to unite all people under the banner of the Jewish faith. Jessica G. Rabin points out that like "the Israelites who have a special destiny, Cather's epic farmers must chart their own path, trust their fathers, and show faith during difficult times" (96). Jim, as a legal counsel for a western railroad, evokes the colonial industrial age transforming the west for the nation at large, subjugating, but not incorporating the native Plains Indians into the majority. Jim may see his path as acting out a "special destiny," but his inheritance is wrapped up in colonization and exploitative development, not enlightenment and uplift. Jim's reference to Psalm 47 implicitly confesses his life of cheating and rationalization along the same lines as the internal colonialism evoked within the Psalm. Jim does not discover meaning and a sense of purpose, but the hollowness of living up to the ideals expressed in Psalm 47. Thus, Cather presents an outwardly successful yet inwardly hollow Jim who either cannot, or chooses not to, incorporate foreign people, exhibiting a typical imperialist desire for a hegemonic culture over

lesser groups. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* the “main battle in imperialism is over land,” yet “when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested and even for a time decided in narrative” (xiii). Jim’s own sense of nationhood and identity formation is likewise formulated in narrative. Jim’s biblical influences reveal a “militaristic” Christianity bent on misguided imperialism and a misguided desire for culture homogeneity within the U.S. Cather’s portrayal of an ironic Jim Burden illustrates an anti-imperial stance within the novel. *My Ántonia* is more than a pioneer story, it represents the misguided connection of myth, narrative and national identity formation prevalent in many of the settlers and U.S. citizens who populated the region they had evacuated of Indians and natural resources.

The Prince of the House of David and the Failure of U.S. Messianic Imperialism

Cather’s revealing allusion to a popular religious novel, *The Prince of the House of David* (1855) by Joseph Holt Ingraham performs another critique of religious justifications for U.S. imperialism and claims of American political superiority to other nations.⁶ As conditions hardened on the prairie, thus making life more difficult for the Shimerdas, the immigrants clashed with the Burdens over the Burdens’ lack of meaningful charity. Upset in the aftermath of the fight, Grandmother Burden requests of Jim: “read me a chapter in ‘The Prince of the House of David.’ Let’s forget the Bohemians” (99). This scripturally based novel assists in a cultural forgetting for Mrs. Burden, allowing her to go about her day and ignore the economic peril the Shimerdas face. Ingraham’s epistolary novel works as a para-gospel in which Adina, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant living in Alexandria, travels to Jerusalem when the

events described in the New Testament begin taking place; she writes letters to her father recounting these famous events. Her letters indicate that she, like her father and several prominent Jewish leaders, is reluctant to believe in Jesus because she, like the others, insists the Messiah will be King of the Jews in a direct political sense. For instance, Adina's father says the "kingdom of Messiah [sic] is not a kingdom of repentance and of humiliation, but one of *victory*, of *glory*, and *dominion*. Touching those prophecies of humility and abasement which this prophet of Jordan applies to Messiah, they have no application to our expected Shiloh and Prince" (78; emphasis added). Adina's father vehemently expects, and even demands, earthly political transformation from anyone he would deem as a proper savior. He thus has no respect for the idea of Jesus as savior, and dismisses Jesus' gospel of repentance and humility, familiar hallmarks of Christian faith as practiced in the Burdens' era. In the same letter, Adina's father grows more adamant about the political nature of the coming Jewish Messiah, stating that this savior "shall make Jerusalem the metropolis of the globe, and the kings of the earth tributary at his feet. Such is our Messiah, whom the Lord of Hosts sends us speedily, to lift Judah from the dust of her humiliation" (80). Adina's father is bent on seeing worldly dominion; he wants a political savior who effects change on earth, a literal messianic imperialism based in Jerusalem. For Adina's father, the dream of messiah is to restore a singular Hebrew culture not unlike the Psalmists' dream in Psalm 47 and the nativist dream of a white-dominated U.S. Yet Christian readers of the era would already know that Adina's father is on the wrong side of belief. These readers would recognize Ingraham's critique of this position given the Christian belief in Jesus as exactly the figure decried by Adina's father.

As Ingraham's novel progresses, the reader learns about Adina's growing belief in Jesus as Messiah as she moves away from the idea of a political savior that so many of her friends and

family insist upon and seek. She becomes acquainted with the disciples but never quite accesses their inner circle. Through these friendships, though, she is privy to various events recounted in the New Testament (this is how she is able to communicate them to her father), and while she never meets Jesus directly, she comes to identify with his message, forsaking her Jewish upbringing by the end of the novel to become a follower. However, still thinking that Jesus would be a political savior, she despairs upon Jesus' death, lamenting the loss of both Jesus and any hope for the overthrow of the Romans. Remaining faithful to the gospel accounts, Ingraham portrays a resurrected Jesus. Only after this event does Adina meet with him and finally understand Jesus' true mission. Telling her father that "none of us understood his words" but that she and others now "clearly perceive the meaning of it all" (441), she then writes that "Jesus in all particulars proved himself King of Israel" (460). She even anticipates her father's stubborn refusal: "But you will ask, 'Is He now to reestablish the throne of David, and live forever?'" to which Adina says "[y]es, but not in Jerusalem on earth." Instead, "His kingdom which I once believed to be the land of Judah, is to be in a world beyond the skies [...] The Jerusalem, in which His Throne is to be placed, is heavenly, and the *true* Jerusalem, of which the present one is but the material type" (460). In her estimation, seeking an earthy political kingdom is not the goal of Christianity. Instead, Christians should, like Jesus, focus on the heavenly realm and act accordingly by doing good works on earth in order to be found worthy of the "true Jerusalem."

In this way, Adina presents her final direct response to her father's protestations for a political messiah.⁷ Ingraham creates this extra dialogue not found in the gospels as a teaching moment for his nineteenth-century readers. Since Jesus himself claims that the true Jerusalem is in heaven, the earthly Jerusalem is merely a material dwelling-place that does not really matter. Adina then imagines an extra-biblical image of Jesus' triumphal return to heaven after the

resurrection. She imagines trumpets and angelic voices that seem to borrow language from several psalms, including one line “O clap your hands all ye people of earth shout his triumph ye hosts of heaven!” that strongly resembles Psalm 47:1, “O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.” In this way, the empire dreamed of in Psalm 47 is relocated from earth to heaven; Psalm 47 gets transformed into a spiritual dream of other-worldly, not earthly unification. Ingraham’s primary message here and in the novel is that Christianity is not a political religion. Instead, Ingraham’s novel suggests that personal transformation, not political transformation, should be Christianity’s hallmark. The Burdens, like many U.S. Protestants of the era, seem to misunderstand this distinction in striving for political glory through messianic imperialism and earthly gain, yet they also fail to be political enough: they do not uplift the Shimerdas in their worldly need.

Cather’s brief inclusion of *Prince* is no accident and is another parallel text offering commentary on the contemporary situation depicted in the novel. In fact, she may have even been aware of the underlying reference to Psalm 47 in *Prince*. Whether intentional or not, Cather’s message is the same: she includes an ironic reading of Psalm 47 and Ingraham’s didactic, epistolary novel as a critique of any biblically justified U.S. imperialism and as a critique of the Burdens’ ethical inaction and how they justify it to themselves, suggesting that their stance is inconsistent with Christ’s teachings. *My Ántonia* seems to undermine the imperial fantasy of a white Protestant U.S. bringing uplift and salvation through conquest, just as Ingraham undermines insistence on political salvation and domination through religion. The novel echoes Ingraham’s critique of the desire for a united, racially homogenous political culture that would exclude or subjugate other peoples for its own gain.

Just as Psalm 47 acts as a lesson from Jim’s grandparents to Jim, Cather uses the didactic

nature of Ingraham's novel in illustrating how the Burdens (and many U.S. Christians) miss the point of Christianity. Gregory S. Jackson's "'What Would Jesus Do?': Practical Christianity, Social Gospel Realism and the Homiletic Novel" explains this didactic function in exploring the impact of a newly emerging Protestant reading culture during the later portions of the nineteenth century. Coining the term "homiletic novel," Jackson cites popular Christian novels like Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1896) as a "powerful form of mass media" in which "both form and content proved an antidote to two challenges plaguing most late nineteenth century congregations: Christian resignation in the face of naked social need," precisely the Burdens' flaw, "and parishioners' enervating doubts about religion's relevance in an age of industry, mechanization, and scientific advancement" (642). These texts, Jackson argues, allow Christians actively to imagine how their faith plays out in their daily lives, creating a "moral script for spiritual performance" (643) in a de-politicized setting. While Ingraham does not present Jesus in a modern setting, his novel evokes contemporary situations since he invites reader participation: Adina is writing to her father, trying to convince him to believe in Jesus for the right reasons, just as Ingraham is writing to non-believers and to U.S. Christians who are conflating religion and imperialism. Ingraham warns against conflating Christianity and empire, reminding readers of Christianity's origin in the ministry of a man who sought neither political gain, nor earthly empire, but came to serve others.⁸

Of a more contemporary audience for homiletic fiction, Erin Smith argues in *What Would Jesus Read?* that, "[q]uite pragmatically, popular readers cared if these texts *worked*—that is, made them better people, managed their fears and anxieties, and made them feel as if their lives mattered in the larger scheme of things" (7). For Mrs. Burden, her reading does not seem to "work" in the way it should. Her reading of *Prince* seems to manage her fears and anxieties

inasmuch as she can focus on Christianity as oriented toward the next life, but it does not seem to make her a better person who offers self-sacrificing charity to help the Shimerdas. While the novel might have helped Mrs. Burden forget the plight of the misfortunate, since the text suggests that the oppressed will not rise against their oppressors in this life, she still misses the point that the Christian life should result in self-transformation. Her reading of *Prince* might have allowed her to transcend class and ethnicity in order to effect change in her life and in the Shimerdas' lives, had her didactic reading of popular Christian fiction, or her Christian faith, worked the way it should have.

Cather seems to argue a similar point in her previous novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915). After a homeless man commits suicide in the town, the novel's heroine, Thea Kronborg, wonders how Christianity really influences people who say they believe it. "It seems to me," she says, "that the whole town's to blame. I'm to blame, myself. I know he saw me hold my nose when he went by. Father's to blame. If he believes the Bible, he ought to have gone to the calaboose and cleaned that man up and taken care of him. That's what I can't understand; do people believe the Bible, or don't they?" She then wonders, "[i]f the next life is all that matters, and we're put here to get ready for it, then why do we try to make money, or learn things, or have a good time? There's not one person in Moonstone that really lives the way the New Testament says. Does it matter, or don't it?" (154). Cather seems to be making a similar point in her allusion to *Prince*: Christianity is not an overly political religion that seeks worldly gain, nor does it allow its adherents to forget their earthy life. But neither is it apolitical. Both Ingraham and Cather seem to think that Christian faith should result in personal transformation and a desire to serve others in concrete ways—a blending of faith and works. Mrs. Burden helps the Shimerdas to be sure, but she does not take social action on their behalf, nor does she seem to suffer with the

downtrodden. In fact, she wants to forget their plight altogether by reading *Prince*—a text that should inspire its reader to act charitably. Mrs. Burden seems to miss the point of the novel; she does not recognize the critique of her own messianic imperialism implicit in using the text to “forget the Bohemians.” She thus fails both in seeking to fuse Christianity and nationalism in the ways many Anglo-Protestants of the era did, and in simply living out her faith to help those around her in accordance with the dictates of Christianity. Interestingly, Paul Gutjhar suggests that *Prince* places an “emphasis on the female” (146) to “feminize Jesus in particular and emphasize the feminine in general[.] Ingraham [thus] created a novel full of encouragement and apologetic resources for women who were attempting to execute their responsibilities as the nation’s chief moral agents” (163). When Grandmother Burden reads this novel to forget what she should be doing to assist those in need, we see how far short she falls of being a “moral agent” for her family or the nation.

The Burdens, as white U.S. Protestants, think they can help their neighbors in their struggles to survive in the harsh prairie terrain but actually fail to save the “alien in their midst.”⁹ The Burdens do bring food to the Shimerdas, but after visiting the sodden cave where the Shimerdas live in animal-like fashion, Jim, evoking imperialist rhetoric of the era (with Cather evoking Payne’s letters), recounts that “all the way home grandmother and Jake talked about how easily good Christian people could forget they were their brothers’ keepers” (91). Ironically, the Burdens miss the point of their own commentary, not realizing how little their “keeping” alleviates the Shimerdas’ struggles. Grandmother Burden also misses her own complicity in the Shimerdas’ situation. She says, ““I will say, Jake, some of our brothers and sisters are hard to keep. Where’s a body to begin, with these people?”” (91). In this domestic version of the “white man’s burden,” Grandmother Burden here offers a self-congratulatory notion of Burden charity

yet also expresses exasperation at their inability to help (which Mrs. Burden thinks is the Shimerdas' fault). Extreme poverty seems daunting to Virginia Burden, but her charity never goes beyond the superficial despite the very real danger the Shimerdas face.

After they see that only a minimal amount of charity will be coming from the Burdens, the Shimerdas lash out. When visiting the Burdens' home, a stark contrast to their less-than-meager dwelling, the Shimerdas are impressed with how much the Burdens have. *Ántonia* observes, "[y]ou got many, Shimerdas no got" (98). Jim's grandmother gives the Shimerdas an iron pot, but Jim says, "I thought it weak-minded of grandmother to give the pot to her [Mrs. Shimerda]. She was a conceited, boastful old thing, and even misfortune could not humble her" (98). More bickering ensues, especially regarding Mr. Shimerda's downward emotional spiral, culminating in an accurate statement from *Ántonia*: "'your grandfather is rich,' she retorted fiercely. 'Why he not help my papa?'" (99). After Jim voices more disparaging thoughts towards Mrs. Shimerda and *Ántonia*, Jim's grandmother counters, "'She's not old, Jim, though I expect she seems old to you. No, I wouldn't mourn if she never came again. But, you see, a body never knows what traits poverty might bring out in em. It makes a woman grasping to see her children want for things'" (99). Here Mrs. Burden is fed up, unwilling to offer further charity towards the Shimerdas, but because of Mrs. Shimerda's anger, Mrs. Burden does agree that poverty might make a person do something she would not do otherwise. However, neither she nor Mr. Burden will risk the family's well-being in offering direct monetary support, a better living situation, or any life-changing materials for the Shimerdas' benefit. The Burdens perhaps offer more charity than most, but only a minimal amount—a strictly legalistic fulfillment of the call to "love your neighbor," not a transformative instance of self-sacrifice that might reverse the Shimerdas' plight. Nothing in their treatment of the Shimerdas during their first harrowing winter on the

frontier speaks to a sacrificial, transformative action on the Burdens' part, nothing like the "humility and debasement" (78) that Ingraham preaches in the very text Mrs. Burden uses to "forget the Bohemians." Instead, the Burdens give what they can afford to lose—foodstuffs, labor, odds and ends, discounted goods—without risking their lifestyle for the betterment of others, nothing like a radical Christ-like sacrifice of charitable giving. The Shimerdas seem to agree.

Soon after the Burden-Shimerda conflict, Mr. Shimerda, isolated, most likely depressed, commits suicide. The ostensibly superior U.S. civilization that credits itself with saving power cannot accommodate his cultured lifestyle of playing classical music and having intellectual conversations, and, therefore, cannot "save" him. Jim laments this loss: "after I went back to bed, this idea of punishment and Purgatory came back on me crushingly. I remembered the account of Dives in torment [Luke 16], and shuddered. But Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish; he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer" (106). Jim provides another ironic commentary on the Burden-Shimerda split here. In the account in Luke 16:19-31, a rich man and a poor man die at the same time. The rich man goes to torment while the poor man is taken up to heaven with Abraham. The rich man tries to convince Abraham to allow him to warn his brothers about the torment, but Abraham denies him: "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" (Luke 16:25). Steven B. Shively argues the Burdens "brought food and other assistance to the bereaved family and offered prayers of mercy and comfort" (55), showing that the parable's theme of "conflict between the poor and the rich, with its clear sympathy for the poor man is echoed in the poverty of Mr. Shimerda and his family" (56). Yet just as Jim Burden fails to see his family's connection to Mr. Shimerda's suicide, the connection between the

tormented rich man and the wealthy Burden family seems to be lost on him.

Here again Cather critiques U.S. Protestant Christianity within the novel. The Burdens certainly offer comfort and assistance to the Shimerdas—more so than other community members—yet their assistance is not unlike the crumbs falling from the rich man’s table that feed Lazarus in the parable. The Burdens’ Christianity makes no real difference for those who suffer and, therefore, cannot offer the uplift and salvation promised in the era’s rhetoric of messianic imperialism. Not too long after Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, Jim suggests that Ántonia should plant crops based upon Grandfather Burden’s advice. Rejecting the advice, Ántonia says, “[h]e not Jesus [...] He not know about the wet and dry” (115). Here, Ántonia could be thinking of various times in the gospel accounts where Jesus exhibits power over natural phenomena. While the discussion centers on farming practice, Ántonia’s denial of Grandfather Burden’s agricultural prognostications is meant to weaken Jim’s faith in his grandfather by suggesting Mr. Burden has no such power, no such insight, and he cannot save those in need as Jesus can and does in the gospels. By demonstrating that salvation for the Shimerdas cannot come from a Christianity advocating either an internal or external rhetoric of imperial, political uplift, Cather links U.S. Protestants like the Burdens to the mistaken Jewish leaders in *Prince* who insist that salvation come through political domination. If they truly read, interacted with, and understood Ingraham’s message, the Burdens’ would see Christ’s impact on their lives. Instead, Ingraham and Cather both suggest, U.S. Christians should simply live out their faith and let its moral impact play out in the absence of political considerations or the pursuit of particular ideals.

The Book of Kings and U.S. Nativism

The belief in messianic imperialism, moreover, created an inherent conflict between the desire for expansion and uplift, on the one hand, and the desire to maintain cultural purity and hegemony, on the other. Since a “chosen people” is an exclusive group that needs a destiny to fulfill (usually involving expansion and / or conquest), how could the United States both champion its divinely ordained cause abroad and, at the same time, maintain cultural purity at home? In other words, how in an era of external expansion beyond the nation’s borders, should the U.S. deal with the peoples it thereby incorporated in its newly acquired territories? What sort of rights would be extended to foreign peoples in their native lands? Would they be granted rights of U.S. citizenship, or self-government at home? Americans also wondered how to handle the influx of non-Western, non-Protestant immigrants making their way to the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This latter issue encouraged nativism—the belief that the United States should be a nation of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Jim’s attachment to the Book of Kings illuminates the role of nativism in the novel. The Book of Kings is primarily a book about geopolitics, homogeneity, internal governance, and centralizing power for ancient Israel’s kings. Kings also discusses wars, domestic conflicts, and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, ending with the destruction of the Temple, an event that took place in 587 BC. In fact, Kings is a continuation of Israel’s story of conquest begun by King David. Sugirtharajah reminds us that “[u]nder King David, Israel was transformed into an imperial power. David was able to make Israel a dominant power, and 2 Samuel 8 lists the names of the nations he conquered. In a short span of time he was able to annex Syria, Moab, Ammon, Amalek and Edom. More importantly, the capture of Edom, which commanded the ports on the Red Sea, and the treaty with Tyre enabled Israel to control the trade route which set her on the

path of commercial prosperity” (189). This is not unlike the rise of the U.S. to global power as territorial expansion led to increasing economic prosperity and influence. David’s expansion created a “theology of empire based on God’s special relationship with the people he has chosen. In addition, there is a promise for the monarch or enduring dynasty and an assurance by the deity of his lasting presence in the royal shrine” (190). Kings continues this story of dynastic power.

In other words, Kings is about internal governance, about an expansionist nation facing military and cultural pressure from internal factions of foreign cultural groups, paralleling the concerns of nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. nativists. Kari Latvus puts it this way: “A major theme in the biblical story before [the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah] is: how to get the land and live in it” (186). For the chroniclers of Kings, each King of Israel (Judah is discussed after the kingdoms split) is evaluated in chronological order according to whether he did good or evil in the sight of the Lord. This evaluation, George Savrus writes, is based solely on “the state of cultic worship during his reign” (146): those “kings who shun idolatry and enact religious reforms are singled out for praise,” and “those who encourage pagan practices are denounced” (146). The denounced “pagan practices” were coming from sources outside Israel, creating a sort of religious pluralism shunned by the chroniclers in Kings. For instance, according to the Kings narrative, King Jeroboam was prophesied to lead revolt against King Solomon under God’s order since Solomon could not maintain the religious and cultural purity that he was charged to uphold because he was too influenced by non-Jewish people, especially his many foreign wives. Solomon learned of this plot and tried to have Jeroboam killed, but Jeroboam escaped to Egypt. After some complicated political maneuvering, King Jeroboam returned from Egypt to challenge Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, but failed in ousting him. After being installed as king, Rehoboam promised to be more demanding of the Jews than his father

Solomon had been. Jeroboam, together with ten tribes of Israel, revolted against Rehoboam, splitting Israel into two kingdoms, Judah under Jeroboam in the north and Israel under Rehoboam in the south.

Despite his righteous beginning, however, King Jeroboam was also unable to maintain the Lord's exacting standards of cultural and religious purity, eventually installing golden calves at Dan and Bethel and becoming known as the king who "caused Israel to sin" (1 Kings 15:30). Indeed, he becomes the prototype of the evil king for the Kings' chroniclers (fifteen later kings are said to be as "evil as Jeroboam"). Yahweh even states in Kings that Jeroboam "hast done evil above all that were before thee: for thou hast gone and made thee other gods, and molten images, to provoke me to anger, and hast cast me behind thy back" (1 Kings 14:9). Like the warning to Israel in other books of the Hebrew Bible about marrying foreign women, Kings recounts the destructive foreign influences upon the unique community of God's chosen people. Essentially, like U.S. nativists' fears about a rupture in Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, the Book of Kings is concerned with religious homogeneity and the preservation of the nation as a distinct cultural entity with particular practices that should be honored.

Kings is also about the centralizing of power for a tribal, diffuse people. While most chapters deal with a given king (each successive king receives about one chapter), the book begins with King David's death and King Solomon's succession. Kings then spends several chapters on this famous king, with a healthy amount of discussion of Solomon's founding of the Temple—the ultimate embodiment of Jewish religion and political life that Savrus calls "a sacred center, a point of contact between man and God, whose power flows into Jerusalem, if not into the entire nation" (159). The Temple, then, powerfully fuses nationalism and religion in this central location. In this way, Solomon is able to unite the "loosely knit tribes" of Israel in

religion, culture, and government under one power center. David charges Solomon that “the LORD may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:4). Here again, David impresses upon Solomon the importance of maintaining the cultural “way” to preserve a pure relationship to God through the law handed down by Moses. If they succeed, David says, the royal line will continue without trouble. The continuance of the kingdom, then, depends upon maintaining cultural homogeneity.

According to Solomon, David could not build the Temple because too much blood was on his hands and he did not have peace with his external neighbors. Only after achieving an external peace and a sort of isolationist policy can the Hebrew nation set about centralizing power. After consolidating power internally and abroad, then, Solomon sets about building the Temple to accomplish his lasting legacy. After an interview with King Hiram of Tyre who suggests the timing is now right to build the Temple because peace is achieved, Solomon says, “I purpose to build an house [sic] unto the name of the LORD my God, as the LORD spake unto David my father, saying, Thy son, whom I will set upon thy throne in thy room, he shall build an house [sic] unto my name” (1 Kings 5:5). Here, genealogy is a way of referencing and maintaining the ethnic purity of the Hebrews as a covenant people defined by lineage (the Hebrew Bible and the gospels spend a lot of time on genealogy). In this way, continuity and stability are highly valued as cultural markers. Having one’s genealogy established links the past, present, and future, providing a road map of one’s heritage and one’s destiny. In a similar manner, the Burden grandparents attempt to hand a set of religious and nationalistic beliefs to Jim, and the boy’s interest in Kings suggests that their efforts to establish this genealogical

continuity are largely successful. Moreover, lineage can enjoy a legal distinction when it cannot be based on biology. Since he has no children himself, Jim chooses to pass on his inheritance to young men with “big western dreams” who are not his flesh and blood. Those successors are thus free to develop Jim’s investment and expand their influence in the West even after Jim is gone, but Jim’s investment will remain a factor in their development and continuation. Similarly, Solomon’s own ascension to the Jewish throne was fraught with conflict with relatives whom David endorsed before his death. Solomon won out and claimed legal and genealogical continuance even though other contenders had a biological right but did not inherit.

Jim’s attachment to the Book of Kings suggests a similar desire for external peace in promoting national harmony—a seeming point of seeking nativist purity to eliminate disagreement. Like the ancient Israelites in Kings, U.S. Protestants found religious reasons for their nativist stances. Nativists saw the preservation of a white, Protestant majority as a sacred duty just as the chroniclers of Kings saw the preservation of Israel as God’s commandment. Higham notes that nativists “believed passionately in the traditional ideal of a fluid, homogenous culture; yet they saw it threatened everywhere” (38). U.S. nativist ideals were rooted in anti-Catholicism since for most nativists the Catholic Church was the primary enemy of religious freedom and ethnic integrity. U.S. Protestants did not trust Catholics as potential citizens, fearing their allegiance would be with Rome rather than with Washington. Billington writes that leaders “of the anti-Catholic movement were aware that their best means of appealing to the middle class was through the Bible.” If “Catholicism could be demonstrated as an enemy of the Gospel, it would become the religious duty of [the majority middle-class] Protestants to destroy American Popery” (142). To this end, the “average Protestant American of the 1850’s had been trained from birth to hate Catholicism” (345). While the action in the novel is set in the late nineteenth

century rather than the 1850s, Grandfather and Grandmother Burden are certainly among that earlier generation. I am not suggesting the Burdens are blindly anti-Catholic, but Mr. Burden's acts of "Protestantizing" Mr. Shimerda's Catholic practices—which made Mrs. Burden uneasy—point towards a suspicion of Catholicism and a refusal to allow it an equal footing with Protestantism.

Cather's allusion to Kings makes the connection between the scriptural text and Jim's own current situation navigating differences amongst the various cultures emerging in the U.S. interior. Jim relates to the Book of Kings (and the Psalms his grandfather read) as to other texts referenced in "The Shimerdas" section: he imagines himself within the action, using those books to understand his present situation. In the case of Kings, young Jim connects with a text that celebrates the subjugation of foreign cultures in order to preserve national purity.¹⁰ Cather's allusion to the Book of Kings adds another layer of textual understanding to her account of nativism and its religious rationalizations. Through ironic commentary in *My Ántonia* she attempts a counter-definition of national identity, writing against the white Protestants seeking biblical precedent for denying immigrants and newly governed people the rights of citizenship.

Cather's kinsman Payne recognized this as well. The Filipinos "will be unable to adapt themselves to American customs," he writes. For Payne, the conflict has "reached the Rubicon of a heterogeneous people, yea even crossed it. It is Rome again I trust not her destiny is ours [sic]. But there is no necessity for foreign conquest. The U.S. freesoil millions of acres of undeveloped land, and to a certain extent a homogenous people [sic]" (George Cather Ray Collection, September 30, 1898). Payne believes that the nation's actions abroad are disturbing the home culture and are now unable to reverse course, and his fears illustrate Kaplan's argument that anarchy "is conjured by imperial culture as a haunting specter that must be subdued and

controlled, and at the same time, is a figure of empire's undoing" (13). Payne fears the U.S. will be undone in attempting to placate and Americanize the Filipinos. Since the U.S. already has a "homogenous" people that can fill the undeveloped land at home, it has no need to add newcomers by allowing or encouraging Filipinos to immigrate. Payne also seems to recognize that the U.S. has enough natural resources at home that seeking them abroad is unnecessary. He writes of the interior of the Philippine islands that it "is undeveloped land of which we have abundance at home," and therefore not worth the trouble of establishing a force "centralized in power, one which must have a large standing army and a navy as strong as the strongest, at Manilla" (George Cather Ray Collection, September 30, 1898). For Payne, the Filipinos have enough land and resources on their own territory to work with and so does the U.S. Acquiring land overseas is not worth the loss of American life, or the influx of foreigners that might result.

However, the Burdens' religiously based sensibility seems to shape both an imperialist mindset and a nativist mindset in Jim. On his first night in Nebraska, Jim hopes his grandfather, Josiah,¹¹ will choose "one of my favorite chapters in the Book of Kings" (57) to read aloud. Since Jim identifies with his favorite reading materials and likens his surroundings to what he reads, his identification with Kings hints at imperial and nativist inclinations. Considering the novel's mode of operation as a framed reminiscence, the reference to Kings is a pointed detail that Jim (and Cather) places in the narrative as a clue to Jim's outlook. While the reference remains unelaborated, and since no clues are given about Jim's favorite chapters, the allusion could encompass the whole Book of Kings, allowing the work to embed issues of empire and internal national affairs in the narrative of Jim's frontier experience.

Cather's critics disagree about her stance towards turn-of-the-century U.S. nativism. Both Walter Benn Michaels and Elizabeth Ammons argue that Cather is a nativist, which would align

her inclusion of Kings with a celebration, not a critique of homogeneity. However, feminist critics rightly see *Ántonia*'s resistance to being "Jim's" woman as a critique of Jim's failed effort to incorporate divergent cultures into a hegemonic white culture.¹² While Kings celebrates homogeneity, then, Cather celebrates individual identity when that individuality is faced with elements of ideological control in the name of homogeneity. Furthermore, the many successes of the supposedly inferior "hired girls" illustrate their ability to succeed on their own terms within U.S. culture. Lena Lingard (a friend of both Jim and *Ántonia*, and a romantic interest for Jim) becomes a celebrated dress maker in San Francisco. Tiny Soderball (another of the contemporary plains immigrants) becomes rich through various business ventures capitalizing on the Alaskan Gold rush, and *Ántonia* finds success in developing her family's farm from a tiny sod cave into a thriving homestead.

For Kaplan, "domestic metaphors of national identity are intimately intertwined with renderings of the foreign and the alien, and [...] notions of the domestic and the foreign mutually constitute one another in an imperial context" (4). One key context for *My Ántonia*, then, is the conflict between the foreign-born hired girls—literal domestics—and the Anglo-Protestant U.S.-born pioneers. As the U.S. "strove to nationalize and domesticate foreign territories and peoples, annexation threatened to incorporate non-white foreign subjects into the republic," a development that might "undermine the nation as a domestic space" (28). According to Jim, the country girls were once thought a "menace to the social order" (158) of Black Hawk, causing disruption in the social milieu in which social norms prevented the interactions between U.S.-born citizens and the foreign born from going too far. The established social order feared that comingling with foreigners would threaten white Protestant cultural and economic control over the West. In holding to Anglo-Protestant ideals, however, the established Black Hawk order was

eclipsed by the hired girls' economic and cultural successes. Those successes illustrate that the "woman's sphere can be represented by both women and men as a more potent agent for national expansion" than "direct male agency" (Kaplan 29). Patricia Chu puts the conflict this way: "Modernist criticism dealing with the construction of natives often examines the 'primitivist' response to empire as a fascination with reconstructing the individual psyche," whose "[r]acial and cultural otherness, [along with] different kinds of art, artifacts and ritual, and the simultaneous threat and promise of 'going native' stand in contrast to the internalization, industrialization, commodification, homogenization and rationalization perceived as characteristic of modernity" (161). The Black Hawk community fears mixing with immigrants because doing so could threaten their modernity and their cultural and economic hegemony. In fact, even though "[a]ll the young men felt the attraction of the fine, well-set-up country girls who had come to town to earn a living" (156), and even though the country girls' "beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background," Black Hawk's "anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth" (158). The allure of cultural homogeneity was too strong, so "Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used" (158).

Jim's own relationship to nativism and the hired girls is complex. During the fight with the Shimerdas over his family's unwillingness to provide useful aid, Jim responds to a heated retort from *Ántonia* with a childish nativist sentiment, saying, "[p]eople who don't like this country ought to stay home. [...] We don't make them come here" (98). Jim's response is not that different from the attitude he will decry among the townspeople as an older man. At this

time in his young life, however, Jim suggests that immigrants ought to accept U.S. culture as it is and that their poverty is their own fault and problem. Like other nativists, he cannot recognize the value of adding foreign people's culture to the nation-building enterprise taking place on the Nebraskan plains. Cather thus puts forth an ironic Jim who cannot see or is silent about his own nativist attitudes. Though she celebrates the chance at renewal afforded to the immigrant as illustrated by the hired girls, Jim has to go through years of disappointment to see this.

Eventually however, Jim does change his mind and comes to admire the hired girls' success. Stating that one "result of [...] family solidarity was the foreign farmers in our country were the first to become prosperous" (157), Jim begins to celebrate this prosperity, which allowed the daughters of the initial waves of immigrants to marry sons of like nationalities. As a result, "the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own" (158), and their children are "better off than the children of the town women they used to work for." As an adult, Jim critiques Black Hawk's bias against the "hired girls," showing that the townspeople's nativism held them back: "I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls was very stupid" (158). To the townspeople, "[a]ll foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English" (158), even though "[t]here was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction of *Ántonia's* father" (158). Jim shows that denying the culture and economic contributions made by supposedly undesirable people leaves nativist sentiment behind in a changing economy and society. It is now the "hired girls" who are running successful farms and the arrogant townspeople who are economically below the immigrants. The aged, tempered Jim sees this, stating that he has "live[d] long enough to see my country girls come into their own. [...] To-day the best that a harassed Black Hawk merchant can hope for is to sell farm machinery and

automobiles to the rich farms” that grew out of those initial immigrant holdings (158).

Jim’s early attachment to the Book of Kings reveals an entitled desire for cultural homogeneity. Just like the kings who “did well in the sight of the Lord” by maintaining an unadulterated religious-political culture, Jim initially identifies with resistance to foreign influence. As such, he misses Urgo’s point about nation-building: that the “price of admission into empire is to abdicate any unchangeable, principled existence that will not yield to the business of migration. Intractability is the national heresy. Americans must learn that they contain multitudes or they will be, in some fashion, destroyed” (189). In other words, successful nation-building demands pluralism; it is a logical and necessary consequence of internal expansion. Cather, in *My Ántonia*, seems to agree, and Jim learns this lesson, too, albeit slowly and painfully. The “national heresy” for the Hebrew nation *was* cultural pluralism, but this stance proved untenable and the nation was torn apart by its intractability. Young Jim’s attachment to ancient Israel is likewise out of place in the modern era, when the new “national heresy” is to insist on cultural homogeneity. Cather seems to suggest in her novel that U.S. nativists will be eclipsed by foreigners if they refuse to incorporate the cultural diversity of immigrants into the majority. Cather herself argues that this “passion for Americanizing everything and everyone is a deadly disease with us. We do it the way we build houses. Speed, uniformity, dispatch, nothing else matters. [...] A ‘foreigner’ was a person foreign to our manners or customs of living, not possible prey for reform” (in Bohlke 71-72). Taking it further, she maintains that the “Americanization committee worker who persuades an old Bohemian housewife out here that it is better for her to feed her family on tin-canned foods instead of cooking them a steamed goose for dinner is committing a crime against art. Too many women,” she continues, “are trying to take short cuts to everything. [...] Times may change, inventions may alter a world, but birth,

death, love, maternity cannot be changed” (148). Here, Cather seems to condemn the impulse towards homogenizing diverse groups of people into an American mold. For her, the “manners” and “customs of living” of diverse groups bring added value to the overall culture and “cannot be changed.” Sugirtharajah suggests of the Hebrew Bible that the “Old Testament has a telling message: misuse power and you will be punished. Empires are seen as condemned both for their predatory nature and for their arrogance” (190). While white Anglo-Protestants might have formed and shaped the early U.S. nation, they must now recognize their own “predatory nature” and “arrogance” in not allowing foreign people the same opportunities that they have had on the North American continent. The success of the foreign-born in *My Ántonia*, then, illustrates Anglo-America’s failure to nationalize and domesticate the “other.”

Conclusion: The Bible’s Important, Yet Overlooked Connection

The Bible often becomes a battleground for competing ideologies. Arguments for or against slavery have found root in the Bible. U.S. politicians used biblical justifications either in defense of or as a critique of the United States’ entrée into overseas acquisitions. However, a systematic study of the Bible and Christianity’s influence in the United States literature of empire, nation-building, and national-identity has been missing; discussions of nativism and empire are incomplete without exploring the Bible’s role in shaping U.S. Christians’ outlook on these issues. By citing such intertexts as the Book of Kings, Psalm 47, and *The Prince of the House of David*, *My Ántonia* illustrates the misguided efforts of white Protestant Christians to justify nativism and messianic imperialism through religious texts or arguments. In the novel, Cather criticizes believers’ mistaken fantasy of a homogeneous culture built upon white Protestantism while at the same time criticizing Christian belief in a divinely mandated

imperialism of uplift and salvation—the policy advocated during the Spanish-American War. Cather’s allusions offer a pointed criticism, suggesting that not all period students of the Bible advanced an imperial cause or justified ethnocentrism. A careful reading of these embedded allusions suggests that a “chosen people” mentality can only be had at the price of excluding others. For Cather, such exclusion has no place on the prairie or in the United States as a whole, since this thinking betrays the “pluribus” of “e pluribus unum.” Cather reminds her readers that nativists would do well to remember their own non-U.S. origins and to maintain a healthy skepticism toward the state-endorsed ideologies that justified overseas expansion and domestic nativism.

Endnotes

¹ *Prince*'s immense popularity not only spurred Ingraham to write two similar (but less popular) religious-historical novels but also spawned a wave of religious-based fiction exemplified by such late-century homiletic novels as Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1896).

² Blythe Tellefsen's "Blood in the Wheat," and Mike Fischer's "Pastoralism and its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism," for instance.

³ *My Ántonia* does not offer any directly colonized characters, but the Shimerdas and other immigrants can be seen as being economically oppressed / exploited by the dominant Anglo-Americans. The "hired girls," for instance, could be seen as oppressed and / or subordinated. Hence, the economically advantaged characters are benefiting from people of lower economic standing in ways similar to traditional imperialism which extracts economic and labor benefits from power dynamics.

⁴ See Michael Gorman's "Jim Burden and the White Man's Burden" for an excellent analysis of Jim's treatment of Native Americans and U.S. expansionism.

⁵ See Malachi 1:3 and Romans 9:13 for the continued discussion of Esau's treatment and meaning in the Bible beyond the Genesis narrative.

⁶ *Prince* is a novel Cather was intimately familiar with. Elsie Cather, Willa's sister, writes Cather biographer Mildred Bennett that "I remember 'The Prince of the House of David.' Bess [their cousin, Bess Seymour] read it aloud to us as younger children after Grandmother Boak had died." (Mildred Bennett Papers, February 5, 1956).

⁷ Ingraham does not offer a conversion narrative for Adina's father yet seems to imply such an event. The novel reveals in the end that he is the one collecting his daughter's letters, providing

them now for public consumption as a means of bringing about similar conversions among the narrative's readership.

⁸ Not all political rhetoric from the era was pro-imperialist, of course. Many cited Christianity and Christian teaching to denounce messianic imperialism. For instance, white supremacist and South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman opposed the potential U.S. occupation of the Philippines, likening it to a forced conversion "carry[ing] the Christian religion to these people upon the point of a bayonet" (in Harris 28). William Jennings Bryan was also critical on religious grounds. Harris points out that Bryan "interpreted America's mission as a mandate to respect other nations' rights" and as such, like many anti-imperialists, was "distinctly uncomfortable with the idea that [his] country could justify forced annexation as a benevolent form of Christian capitalism" (56).

⁹ Cather does not directly make this reference in the novel, but the multicultural elements in *Black Hawk* and its surrounding areas seem similar to the alien population in ancient Israel's midst, whom scripture prohibited the Hebrews from mistreating. This biblical mandate served as a spiritual barometer for the Jews. If they were truly keeping God's commandments then the "alien in the midst" should be treated well and the Jews would also do well. If the nation did not keep God's commandments, however, the alien in the midst would surpass the dominant cultural group as a sign of divine reproach. While not the only description of this contract in the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 28 is the most detailed. Verses 43-44 warn the Jews that if they do not keep the commandments, including the injunction to treat aliens well, then the "stranger that is within thee shall get up above thee very high; and thou shalt come down very low. He shall lend to thee, and thou shalt not lend to him: he shall be the head, and thou shalt be the tail" (Deuteronomy 28: 43-44). Additionally, Exodus 22:21 reminds the Jewish community that it should treat the

“stranger” justly since the Jews themselves were once strangers in Egypt. In this light, Cather’s white pioneers can be seen, once again, as like the ancient Israelites in their interactions, as dominant cultural group, with foreign peoples.

¹⁰ Jim already draws his landscape descriptors from the Hebrew Bible, connecting the language of scripture to his everyday life. He says the prairie “was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed” (71), and he equates his encounter with the snake to the “eldest Evil” (75).

¹¹ Cather may have purposefully included the Josiah namesake as an ironic connection to Kings. King Josiah in the biblical record is one of the last kings of Israel and did well for restoring the Jewish nation to Yahwistic religion, eliminating foreign practices in sweeping reforms. Within Kings, King Josiah is commended for his nativist sentiment in maintaining a homogeneous Hebraic culture. Cather’s novel, however, advocates for a pluralistic society as beneficial to the nation, fostering cultural revitalization by foreign peoples.

¹² Sharon O’Brien’s “Gender, Sexuality, and Point of View: Teaching *My Ántonia* from a Feminist Perspective” discusses and reviews these issues.

III. THOMAS SUTPEN'S "SOLITARY FURNACE EXPERIENCE":

THE BOOK OF DANIEL IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

In the Coen brothers' film *Barton Fink*, the titular character meets a W. P. Mayhew while both are writing screenplays for a Hollywood studio in the 1930s. Like William Faulkner, Mayhew hails from Mississippi, has a wife named Estelle, and is having an affair with a movie studio associate while living in Hollywood. He also has a drinking problem. In fact, Fink first meets Mayhew at an establishment that resembles the famous writerly haunt Musso and Frank, when Mayhew unceremoniously exits a bathroom stall after drinking too much. Fink recognizes him and then praises Mayhew as one of the best living novelists, and the two strike up a friendship. In one of their meetings, Mayhew hands Fink an inscribed first edition of his latest (and last) novel: *Nebuchadnezzar*—an allusion to the Babylonian king described in the Hebrew Bible book of Daniel. While the Coen brothers say Mayhew is clearly influenced by Faulkner, they also maintain he is not a direct representation: their Mayhew is completely ruined both personally and professionally by his Hollywood experience. Moreover, in connecting Mayhew's novel with Daniel, they may have only been emulating Faulkner's common technique of biblically based titles. But in selecting the book of Daniel specifically, they have uncannily hit upon a connection I see between Daniel and *Absalom, Absalom!*, a novel written during Faulkner's screenwriting days in Hollywood. The Coen brothers are certainly not the only people who recognize a connection between Faulkner and the Bible, as Faulkner makes the connection clear himself. Claiming that he read the Hebrew Bible every other year or so (Chancellor 1),

Faulkner coyly outlines a preference for Hebrew scripture, not the New Testament: “To me the New Testament is full of ideas and I don’t know much about ideas,” he says. He prefers the Hebrew Bible because it “is full of people, perfectly ordinary normal heroes and blackguards just like everybody else nowadays, and I like to read the Old Testament because it’s full of people, not ideas” (*Faulkner in the University* 167-168). These “perfectly ordinary normal heroes and blackguards” prevalent in the Hebrew canon frequently make for Faulkner’s source material, allusions, and character ideas in his work; for example, the well-documented references to King David in *Absalom, Absalom!*¹

The connection I see between Daniel and *Absalom* occurs in an enigmatic descriptor that Faulkner’s “town narrator” uses to interpret the novel’s main figure, Thomas Sutpen, upon first seeing him arrive in fictional Jefferson, Mississippi. Stating that Sutpen appears to have undergone some “solitary furnace experience” (24), the narrator seems to allude to the “fiery furnace” story of Daniel 3. In this story, three Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,² are thrown into a furnace for refusing to bow down and worship the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. They are then miraculously saved by divine intervention for holding onto their cultural and spiritual heritage in the face of state-driven oppression bent on suppressing that legacy. In having the collective, Southern-voiced, town narrator, and not the singular narrators of the novel, make sense of Sutpen through biblical comparison, Faulkner invokes the penchant in the U.S. South to interpret experience through biblical parallels. As Charles Reagan Wilson observes, some Lost Cause mythologizers used the prophetic portions of Daniel’s later chapters as an analogy for their experience of the Civil War.³ The town narrator, however, presumably does not know that Sutpen has recently come from Haiti, where he took part in suppressing a violent uprising that suggestively resembles the Haitian Revolution (despite the potential

historical inaccuracies in the novel).

Sutpen's time in Haiti is part of his grand design to build a plantation dynasty in the U.S. South—a grand design that would be subversive against the planter class. This desire stems from his childhood encounter with a black servant on a plantation in Tidewater Virginia, where Sutpen is humiliated after being sent to the big house backdoor because he is a poor white and worse off than the plantation's slaves. Here, he first learns about classism and racism and resolves to join the planter class, but without observing class and (maybe) racial lines once he is successful. His quest to become an anti-imperialist hero (like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) is ruined in Haiti, however, as his "solitary furnace experience" takes on an imperialist aspect when he willingly (and violently) suppresses a labor revolt on a plantation. Even though he bodily escapes the furnace, he is figuratively consumed in the process, re-forged as an imperialist in his willingness to profit from the colonial encounter.

I suggest that Sutpen's "solitary furnace experience" is a more meaningful phrase than previously thought or researched. Aside from some brief commentary, the phrase is not fully explored in Faulkner scholarship, and any connection to Daniel in *Absalom, Absalom!* is absent from critical discourse.⁴ Connecting Faulkner's singular phrase with the book of Daniel, then, deepens the mythic links already forged between Sutpen and figures like King David, Agamemnon, and King Arthur (Hagood 175). Additionally, linking the "solitary furnace experience" with the Haitian Revolution (often described in fiery, smoking, volcano-like language by those who experienced its violence)⁵ connects Faulkner's treatment of Sutpen with an anti-imperialist critique of U.S. involvement in Haiti by showing that Sutpen, like the U.S., does not have the saving power he thinks he does, as evidenced by his repudiation of his own black Haitian son, Charles Bon.

Sutpen's "solitary furnace experience" shows that he is not Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego but is the analogue to the monomaniacal King Nebuchadnezzar, the imperialist under critique in the Daniel story. In fact, I argue that Sutpen is consumed in his furnace experience because he willingly abandons his core mission to combat the planter class. Unlike the Israelites, who are saved and rewarded for holding to their most sacred beliefs in the face of state-driven oppression, Sutpen loses his "innocence" in the fiery furnace of Haiti, leading to his failure to subvert the planter class. This failure implicates the messianic role the United States sought to foster in its own imperialism. In other words, whereas the three Israelites are exemplary anti-imperialists in Daniel, Sutpen emerges a Nebuchadnezzar-like figure as a result of his "furnace experience" in the "volcano" of Haiti.

I thus follow Maxine Rose's claim that "the architectonics of the Bible provide a significant new clue to the puzzling design of *Absalom, Absalom!*" (219) into new scriptural territory. Henry A. Murray in "Definitions of Myth" notes that "[a] single mythic image in the mind, in a poem, or depicted in a painting" can be considered "a *part* of a myth [...] a part which is very commonly sufficient to bring the complete mythic event to the consciousness of those who are familiar with it" (13). Murray's stance suggests that if part of Daniel links with *Absalom, Absalom!*, then all of the work may by extension be drawn in if the audience is familiar with the allusion. Faulkner's specific allusion comes early in the second chapter, allowing the whole of Daniel to permeate the remainder of the text in the reader's imagination. Moreover, the fact that it is the town-narrator who describes Sutpen in this way upon Sutpen's initial entry into Jefferson suggests that the whole of the myth may be present in the minds of the Jefferson community from early on, a community-wide way of interpreting him within a regional culture used to biblical analogy to explain events. It does not seem too far a stretch to suggest that in

Faulkner's own biblically literate imagination a biblically literate community from the nineteenth century would be familiar with the scriptural overtones of a "furnace experience."

Numerous Faulkner scholars argue for the importance of understanding the Bible in decoding Faulkner's works and world. Intertextual theorist Julia Kristeva cautions that if "one reads Faulkner without going back to the Bible, to the Old Testament, to the Gospels, to the American society of the period and to his own hallucinatory experience, I believe one cannot reconstitute the complexity of the text itself" (in Waller 282). More recently, Glenn Meeter argues that "in seeing *Absalom* against a Biblical background we broaden our sense of the world in which it refers far beyond the borders of the South. In relating a Southern experience of 'collapse of dynasty' to the paradigmatic, synecdochal experience of the Hebrews that went into making the Bible, Faulkner relates it to other experiences for which the loss of Zion and the Babylonian Exile stand as symbols" (122). These scholars suggest that the Bible is an essential tool in decoding Faulkner. I wish to see *Absalom* broadened against the biblical background of the book of Daniel. Doing so will not only help "reconstitute the complexity of the text itself" but broaden critical understanding of Faulkner's take on U.S. imperialism, especially regarding the American occupation of Haiti—an occupation drawing to a close during Faulkner's writing of *Absalom*.

Daniel History, Background, and Postcolonialism

An exploration of the book of Daniel allows for a clearer understanding of its underlying presence in and effect upon *Absalom, Absalom!* According to modern biblical scholarship, the text that is today known as Daniel began around 450-400 BC from a few interrelated "court tales" and was expanded and developed during the Maccabean period into its collected, two-part

form, most likely in 167-163 BC (Sims 325). Daniel 1-6 comprises the court tales, wherein Daniel and other Jews negotiate their way and place among the Babylonian court. These negotiations often involve conflict between the imperial Babylonian authority and the religious standing of the Jews in which the Jews always hold to their traditions in the face of state-sanctioned oppression. The Babylonian leaders often come to realize the power and primacy of the God of Israel after the Jews' resistance. After the famous "Daniel and the Lions' Den" story, the tenor of the book changes in chapters 7-12 to include a first-person account from Daniel's perspective that offers prophecy and apocalypse, the only apocalyptic text in the Hebrew Bible. It is largely believed that while the two parts seem disparate in their tone and style, they comprise a whole book that is an allegory of the Jews living under the ruthless reign of Antiochus IV. Read in this way, the Daniel narratives encourage faithful Hebrews to stand strong in the face of imperial oppression and other belief systems. As *Absalom* also does, Daniel offers a history that purports to be much older than the time of its composition in order to camouflage its critique of contemporary events: the Seleucid dynasty and the brutally oppressive Antiochus IV for Daniel; and the 1915-1934 American occupation of Haiti in *Absalom*. In so doing, the book of Daniel offers a powerful postcolonial critique of imperial power as the subaltern repeatedly triumphs over the oppressor. The subaltern, however, becomes the oppressor in Faulkner's tale.

More specifically, Daniel recounts how after the Assyrian conquest of Israel's Northern Kingdom, the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar besiege and then take Jerusalem, plundering the Temple and the city in their wake. According to Hebrew tradition, both the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests were used to punish Israel for straying from God, as each imperial force was moved by God to invade and conquer in order to bring the Jews back into

righteousness. In the Babylonian case, the regime decided that human plunder would benefit the realm. The Babylonians sought the best and brightest of Israel to be taken against their will and from their homeland into Babylon for the finest education and training the capital city could offer, in expectation that they would later serve the state. After describing the conquest, and pointing out that it was God who gave Nebuchadnezzar victory, Daniel continues that the Babylonians sought “[c]hildren in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans” (King James Version, Dan. 1.3). The figures of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among this number, and here the court tales, and the postcolonial themes of Daniel, find their genesis. Indeed, the postcolonial message of Daniel is inherent from the book’s beginning. David Valeta argues that the “primary purpose of [Daniel’s] opening lines is a mood of siege and military defeat by an overwhelming imperial power, not complete historical accuracy” (317). The book depicts “military glory and imperial confidence” as “fleeting rewards of campaigns of conquest.” Indeed, even though “Jerusalem has been successfully subjugated in the first year, the king is already having troubling dreams marked with fear and insecurity.” In Daniel 2, for example, Nebuchadnezzar dreams about a statue of himself that Daniel is able to interpret, explaining to the King how his empire will be divided in the future. Even in the midst of military defeat, then, the Jews are shown to be a destabilizing presence for the governing authority; there is something unnerving about them that upsets the authorities even as they attempt to incorporate Jews into Babylonian culture and ideology.

Renaming the Jews is the first step in this incorporation process. After finding the appropriate Israelites, the Babylonians rename them according to the Chaldean language and

educate them in Chaldean language, culture, and religion. As Philip Chia rightly points out, “Nebuchadnezzar’s strategy to re-educate the elite of Israelites is to indoctrinate and infiltrate the colonized minds” in a “form of neocolonialism” (173). Here, the imperial power exercises its authority even over the names of the oppressed—similarly to Sutpen’s refusal to acknowledge Charles Bon as a Sutpen which becomes an explicit renaming. The text presents that “the prince of the eunuchs [...] gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego” (Dan. 1.7). This renaming transforms the Jewish names closer to those of the Babylonian gods, seeking to connect them to the imperial state and religion, linking them to Babylonian ideology body and soul, since the “change of one’s name without one’s consent or by force, not only is an insult to one’s integrity and dignity, but also a denial of the right to ancestry” (Chia 177). In this manner, Babylon seeks to remove any trace of Jewish heritage from its captives much as Sutpen removes the Supten heritage from Bon.⁶ Though the four Israelites take to their education and become worthy to stand before the Babylonian king after their three-year training, conflicts soon arise between colonizer and colonized in which the oppressed are able to unnerve the oppressors through passive resistance to subtle forms of control and transformation.

For example, during their training, the Jews are invited to partake at the king’s table, but doing so would violate Jewish dietary customs and would be tantamount to a wholesale capitulation to Babylonian laws, customs, and the imperial program. Instead, Daniel, on the others’ behalf, asks that they might hold to Jewish customs as a test against the king’s dietary guidelines to see which proves healthier. The prince of eunuchs agrees and the Jews’ better health than those who ate the King’s food proves them right. As a result, they are allowed to maintain their own dietary regimen. Later, after the appointed three-year training, they are

brought before the king, and “in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm” (Dan 1.19-20). My point here is to show how, though they accept their education and serve the state to the best of their ability, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are from the beginning only willing to go so far with the imperial narrative. They are exemplary in serving the state while resisting interior colonization. “Daniel is offered to the listeners of the story as a model for resistance. His is a fine and careful blend of cooperation and resistance,” maintains theologian Walter Brueggemann (*Social Reading* 141). Thus, Daniel represents a middle ground between extreme resistance to the state and the erasure of Jewish identity by the state. In the scriptural text, colonialization takes the form of ideological indoctrination and oppression in the form of alien values, ideas, and beliefs.

In fact, the Daniel text illustrates how the Jews’ insistence on maintaining their heritage actually enhances the Babylonian state, as these collisions of power between subject and master teach the state how to temper its own arrogance and injustice. The text demonstrates how dependent the earthly powers are upon Yahweh, as Daniel, and not the Babylonian courtiers, continually discerns problems for Nebuchadnezzar and aids in fostering his kingdom; the king would not have been as successful without the Jews in his midst. The negotiations between subject and master, then, allow “for the reconstitution of a superpower obedient to the God of Israel” (Brueggemann, *Theology* 513). Hence, the ruling state-power can learn how to govern righteously and justly, by avoiding oppression against its subaltern subjects, namely the Jews. Rulers err, Daniel shows, when the state tries to destroy the Jewish religion or when they are unfair and oppressive to those on the bottom rung of society’s ladder, since the resistance of the Jews actually creates beneficial social change—their place in the story seems to test the

righteousness of the imperial power. The Daniel tales thus suggest that the imperial power can be disrupted and transformed and the subaltern can maintain their identity through the just example of the lower orders from within.

The fiery furnace episode of Daniel 3 is the moment that most fundamentally expresses the clash between colonizer and subject in this way. Here, the imperial power is destabilized by non-violent resistance yet comes to praise the Hebrew subjects as a result. Daniel Smith-Christopher argues that the book of Daniel cannot be anything but an anti-imperialist text whose “potent sociopolitical power” rests in its “stories of resistance to cultural and spiritual assimilation of a minority by a foreign power” (20). For Smith-Christopher, “there can be no such thing as a non-political reading of Daniel” (34), and its politics cannot be reduced to “facile patriotism,” “good citizenship,” or “personal, pietistic faith.” The fiery furnace episode powerfully illustrates this point. The Jews work for the state since they are forced to do so, but hold no allegiance to the identity-claims Babylon tries to foist upon them by changing their names and giving them powerful positions within the court. Conflict, Daniel seems to say, will always arise between subject and master despite the subject’s apparent accommodation to imperial rule.

For instance, Daniel goes on to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s (often troubling) dreams, much to the king’s delight and favor. The four Jews are promoted and, again, do their best in serving the state in their administrative duties, earning praise for their efforts. Eventually, however, the imperial power goes to King Nebuchadnezzar’s head and he starts to believe it tantamount to divine power. He builds an enormous statue, requiring all subjects to bow down and worship it as a proxy for worshipping him, thus testing the Jews’ fidelity to their own religion’s injunction against worshipping false gods. With the Babylonian administration

gathered in the “plain of Dura,” the ceremony commences and, with Daniel absent in this portion of the text, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to participate. This is brought to the king’s attention, much to his exasperation. After he reminds them that they will be cast into a fiery furnace if they refuse to worship him, they defy the imperial decree, stating “[i]f it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Dan. 3.17-18). Despite their serving the state, and being previously commended for their service, their collective rebuff indicates that the national narrative ultimately holds no pride of place in their lives.

The Jews’ refusal to bow down and worship the statue, of course, only incenses Nebuchadnezzar all the more. Daniel states of the king, “[t]hen was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace seven times more than it was wont to be heated” (Dan. 3.19). The furnace is so hot that the mighty men called forth to place the Israelites into the fire are themselves consumed in the intense heat. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are dressed and fully bound as they are plunged into the furnace. Smith-Christopher notes that the binding is an especially important detail here, since “[b]inding is the symbol of police authority par excellence” for the state (64). Tawny Holm, in her study of the use of burning as a form of capital punishment in the ancient Near East, suggests that “death by fire in Mesopotamia seems to be a penalty particularly suitable for crimes against a hierarchal superior (especially against a king or a god)” (88). Additionally, Carol Newsom and Brennan W. Breed point out that inasmuch as burning by fire, if successful, “erases any trace of what it consumes,” Nebuchadnezzar sought “to erase not only the Jewish people but also any memory of their

resistance against the Babylonian Empire” (114). Thus, coupled with the binding, burning by furnace is the ultimate death penalty, reserved for the most egregious crimes against the figurehead of imperial power who is also the religious power. Their choice to be burned also evokes sacrifice in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, which may work to create sympathy for them. What is more, the fiery furnace is akin to divine punishment. According to Holm, the divine element “indicates [...] great mythological and religious significance to the act of burning. The gods may enforce what human jurisdiction cannot; it is the divine world that is called upon to mete out justice via burning for crimes that cannot be punished on earth” (95). When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego defy Babylon’s highest beliefs about itself, they in effect become the state’s highest enemies.

After the Jews are thrown into the fiery furnace, however, King Nebuchadnezzar is “astonished” by what he sees, asking “[d]id not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?” Instead, he declares, “I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God”—a messianic reference alluding to the being’s saving power. Nebuchadnezzar then calls the three Israelites to come out of the fire, after which “the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them” (Dan. 3.24-27). Rather than divine punishment, divine intervention intercedes on their behalf, reversing the king’s expectations. The Daniel text thus subverts the Babylonian power structure by suggesting that there is a higher authority than the king. God’s intervention against Babylon’s highest punishment implicates the nationalist project of imperial expansion that coopts others into the Babylonian realm. In fact, after their defiance of state power, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

are rewarded with promotion, and King Nebuchadnezzar states that the God of Israel is the only true God. He even decrees that anyone who speaks against their God will be “cut to pieces,” and “their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort” (Dan. 3.28-29). Hebrew defiance leads to Babylonian state reform and challenges Nebuchadnezzar’s self-notions about his power, deity, and the efficacy of his national narrative.

The moment is conspicuously wedded to state imperialism in so far as the golden statue (or stele) that King Nebuchadnezzar sets up represents the conflation of Babylonian spirituality, economic power, and military prowess in one symbol. Noting that the statue is made of “the substance of highest commercial value” (61), Smith-Christopher links the deific image with the most coveted precious metal, melding state economy and religion in one symbol. This symbol represents the entirety of Babylonian culture, enshrining Nebuchadnezzar as godlike in the process since he singly represents Babylon’s spirituality, economy, and military. The exact image of the statue is not presented in the text, but several scholars agree that it is either a Babylonian deity or Nebuchadnezzar himself as a deity. Dutch theologian Ton Veerkamp additionally calls the “[g]olden monstrosity” a “[m]edium of exchange, [a] deposit of value, [and] measure of worth [since] gold was the gravitational center of the Hellenistic economy. The King of Kings made an image in it—he established the economy and made from it a cult object—he made a fetish of gold,” suggesting that the Babylonian “Empire establishes Gold as a god of the whole world” (in Smith-Christopher 61).

Additionally, the Daniel text states that the furnace scene takes place in the “plain of Dura.” The precise location is not known to biblical scholars, but many note that Dura is an ancient Near Eastern term for a military fortification (the famous Dura-Europos is but one example). As such, the dramatic scene likely takes place in front of a military fortification,

strengthening its nexus of religious, economic and martial symbolism. In effect, theologian Andre LaCocque suggests that the “stele represents the empire and is the manifestation of a grotesque hubris” (*Book of Daniel* 59) that threatens “the very soul of Israel” (*Daniel and His Time* 90). The conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and the three Israelites, then, is a struggle between the soul of Babylon and the soul of the Hebrews. This clash further emphasizes the conflict between the economic and military success of the Babylonians as evidenced in their worldly success, and the spiritual character of the Israelites, as evidenced by their integrity.

A final postcolonial aspect of Daniel is that it presents history as resistance against a colonizer, a history from the oppressed perspective. As a result, the text is loose with historical fact and accuracy—a bone of contention throughout modern biblical scholarship from German Higher Criticism onward. However, many scholars are not troubled by the anachronisms and inaccuracies but see them instead as purposeful inclusions—what James H. Sims call an “integral part of the book’s literary technique” (328). For LaCocque, such moves represent a “mystical speculation” (*Daniel and His Time* 82). Valeta adds that, “Daniel is a character that is constructed in part from the past, so that this character transcends time. He is a hero from the past who represents the values of the author and of the present. It is through this character that the epic past is deconstructed and brought into contact with the evaluative concerns of the present” (315-316). In fact, Valeta reads Daniel unconventionally as “menippean satire,” a genre that “liberate[s]” the text “from the limits of history and is characterized by a freedom of plot and philosophical invention. Anything goes in the menippean world. The story need not be entirely realistic and its plot line need not be entirely linear.” The Daniel text subverts and replaces factual history with political and cultural work: namely, the destabilizing of imperial power and the championing of subaltern resistance so as to “encourage similar acts of religious, political,

and cultural defiance in the contemporary world of the reader” (Newsom and Breed 115).

Likewise, *Absalom* plays with historical accuracy to make commentary on contemporary events. Faulkner alters Sutpen’s timeframe in Haiti to evoke the Haitian Revolution as commentary on the U.S. occupation of Haiti concurrent with his composition of the novel.⁷

Using history (including biblical history) as commentary on contemporary events is also prevalent within the cultural work of the Southern Lost Cause—especially as some Lost Cause ideology connected that mythos to Daniel. Much as the Babylonian exile caused Israel to reexamine its interest in court tales and dramatic apocalyptic prophecy in the face of national destruction, so too did the postbellum U.S. South turn to myth and story to explain defeat. “The Exile was a fitting time for review and revision of past history on the part of Israel’s religious teachers,” argues Harlan Creelman; the “destruction of Jerusalem furnished the occasion of thoughtful interpretation of that past; and the Exile gave the leisure necessary” (23). Building on this notion, Meeter argues that this transformation began for the Hebrews under David and then Solomon during “the height of national success,” but that it was “the exilic and postexilic generations above all that would have been challenged by the task of finding the old stories meaningful,” given their experience of defeat and subjugation (108). For Faulkner and other Southern thinkers, “the parallel to the destruction of Jerusalem is the defeat of the South,” the end of its existence “as an independent nation” (Meeter 108). Out of this mood of defeat, revisionist history, and misuses of the past, Daniel found favor in the Southern regional imaginary—especially in the formation of Lost Cause ideology that used Daniel as part of its construction.

Daniel Ideology in the U.S. South

Antebellum and postbellum Southerners employed elements from Daniel to develop an anti-imperial critique of the North / the Union. In this way, Southerners viewed themselves as a righteous, chosen people whose ordeal in the fiery furnace would forge them in adversity and demonstrate the justness of their beliefs and their cause. For them, the North was a Nebuchadnezzar, a cultural imperialist out to destroy their ideology and way of life to replace it with its own culture. Indeed, Daniel's fiery furnace trope was used throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a symbolic discourse of adversity—an ordeal in which the person experiencing the fiery furnace is tested and emerges better off than before by passing the test. Ministers, soldiers, officers, and lay people in both the North and South all used the fiery furnace allusion in their descriptions of sectional conflict, war, and its aftermath. For instance, a Rev. Sutherland opened the U.S. Senate in 1862 with a prayer that gave thanks for the “fiery furnace through which we are passing to test the true spirit of the people and the real sentiments of those who have so long and so loudly cried out for the extinction of human bondage” (December 2, 1862). Sutherland sees the Civil War as a necessary purifying fire to bring the Union back together, eliminate slavery, and denounce “false prophets” in the North. The Civil War is the test that will determine what side is right, and this cannot be accomplished without the adversity of war. Thereby, the fiery furnace ordeal will purify the nation, purging it from the opposing side as the “true spirit of the people” will emerge and rule after proving themselves worthy.

As the fortunes of war turned and many communities experienced the war more directly, Southerners adopted fiery furnace imagery as a badge of honor and a sign of hope. Daisie, a commentator in the *Mobile Register*, writes in November of 1862 that it “was necessary that we should be baptized in blood—that we should pass through the fiery furnace of affliction to be

purified for the enjoyment of freedom and peace.” Daisie encourages her readers to see the trials and tribulations of war as necessary so “that [they] should climb the pinnacle of glory to reach the honors on its summit—and bear the warrior’s cross ere [they] bear the warrior’s crown” (2). For Daisie, the victory cannot come without testing and it will be sweeter for having faced these trials—there must be a “cross” to bear before it can be substituted for a “crown.” Such thinking also made its way into the pulpit. As the war turned towards Georgia, Rev. Steven Elliott, preaching at Christ Church in Savannah, encouraged his hearers that Sherman’s march was necessary. “No new thing has happened to us,” he insisted. “We are only passing through the fiery trial which has tried most of our sister States,” and “while it is right that we should humble ourselves before God, and implore his help in our day of necessity, it is also right that we should imitate the proud example of those desolated States, and prove we are worthy to be classed among the sovereignties which can suffer and die, but cannot pass under the yoke of servitude” (4-5). The fiery furnace for Elliott is something to be proud of, an experience shared with other areas of the South that have been ravaged. Such thinking persisted into the closing months of the War. An anonymous writer to the *Christian Index* exhorted Southerners to repent of their sinfulness and lack of faith. This writer states even in February 1865 that if Southerners change their ways, “[they] shall be taken out of the fiery furnace” and “established as a separate and independent nation” (“Have Faith in God”). For these commentators, the surrounding conflict is merely a sign of better things to come, a necessary test of their virtue to pass before victory can be achieved.

The trope of the fiery furnace even continued after the war—especially, but not exclusively, in the South. Many Southerners continued to interpret the Civil War as a fiery trial and saw Reconstruction in these terms as well. “Virginia has suffered frightfully from the

ordeal,” says a writer to the *Richmond Whig* in August of 1874. “She passed, *or* is passing, through the fiery furnace a second time,” the writer continues, how “Virginia has made almost superhuman efforts to stand up against the weight of her misfortunes” (August 7, 1874). This commentator sees both the Civil War and Reconstruction as spiritual tests in which Virginians, like the three Hebrews, are proving their spiritual worth against an overbearing enemy, evidence of the rightness of the Southern cause. Even governmental officials used this trope. Arkansas Governor A. H. Garland used it to champion the people of his state and call for a day of fasting after home rule returned to Arkansas. Given the “view of the fact we have passed triumphantly through worse than a fiery furnace, and that we have so many reasons to be thankful,” he found it “appropriate to set apart a day for worship—a day of thanksgiving and prayer to the source of all law, of all mercy, of all blessing” (March 23, 1875 2). A writer for the *Alexandria Gazette* asserted that the establishment of Southern Democrat Michael Kerr as speaker of the House of Representatives in 1875 (the first Democrat since 1859 to hold the position) was proof of “passage through the fiery furnace” (Dec 6, 1875). Another observer celebrated the closing of Reconstruction by suggesting that Virginians were “[j]ust emerging [...] from the fiery furnace of the most stupendous civil strife ever sung in poesy or recorded in the annals of history” (*Alexandria Gazette*, Feb 23, 1876).

The most powerful Southern use of Daniel to voice resistance to Northern oppression came in a commencement sermon delivered at Andrew Female College, in Cuthbert, Georgia, in June of 1872 by Bishop Lovick Pierce entitled “The Moral Power of a Good Woman.” Pierce—father of Lost Cause minister and apologist George F. Pierce—charged his hearers that since the Jews were “ever used as a divine medium in the communication of the knowledge of God” (271), they remain an example for contemporary times. Just as God’s promise to the Jews was

“national as well as personal, civil as well as sacred,” the Jews’ example to contemporary people “should never be lost sight of” (272). In his sermon, Pierce celebrated individual Jews who were rewarded for defying imperial power. He praised Joseph, Esther, Mordecai, Daniel, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for their defiance against a pagan imperialism that sought to destroy Jewish religion. Even though Pierce did not explicitly exhort the graduates of this women’s college to defy Northern power, his implicit message seems clear, especially when he condemned the “hybrid women toward the north star who are fussing for woman's rights” (275). He clearly had the North in mind during this commencement sermon, urging the graduates to be like Esther and use their influence from home, not the public sphere. His implication is that like the righteous actors in the Hebrew stories, these women could powerfully resist Northern imperialism through individual defiance. In fact, the women being addressed were likely to become members of Confederate memorial societies such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The leaders of such societies often “received a formal education” at “private female seminaries and women’s colleges” (Cox 5) like Andrew Female College. Wilson argues that Southerners enjoy facing difficult circumstances since it shows a “Southern piety in the face of adversity” that allows “Southern Christians to testify to their religion’s truth” (72). Pierce’s commencement sermon and the popular fiery furnace trope clearly illustrate this phenomenon. For such Southerners, adverse circumstances only demonstrate the righteousness of the Southern cause—that God is chastising His people in order to bring them back into the fold. The Southern people would be proven right and true as they persevered through tough times, emerging triumphant from their struggles.

What is more, a commitment to interpreting the Confederacy in light of prophecy in Daniel exists both in and after the Civil War. In *The Confederate States of America in Prophecy*

(1861), W. H. Seat offers an account of the history of prophecy attributed to Daniel in Christian theology, eventually arguing that the South's people are a holy people with saving power. As such, Seat believes the South's rise proves that "one like the Son of man had appeared in the rise of the Confederate States of America" (132). Confederate divines like Seat saw the South as one of the future kingdoms prophesied about in Daniel 2 and the approaching war as proof of Daniel's prophecies about the end of the world which "cannot be far from their close" (131). For Seat, the North's attempts to undermine slavery and reduce the Confederacy are proof that the "time of trouble, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, has [...] come" (134). Ultimately, with the South seceding and beginning to establish its own nation, "the great prophetic periods have closed: the mystery is finished and the vision of prophecy is unsealed. The final kingdom has arisen, and the Divine Redeemer has come to reign" through the Confederacy (144). Seat's interpretation of history falls into what William Snay calls Southern ministers' use of "religion in the antebellum South [...] simultaneously as an institution, a theology, and a mode of discourse" (6). Such ministers drew "freely and widely on the narrative of Old Testament history," using "the lessons of biblical history primarily to establish and defend the legitimacy of secession" (190). Rable argues that these efforts led to the "relentless, often careless application of biblical typologies to national problems, the ransacking of scripture for parallels between ancient and modern events," and "a nationalistic theology at once bizarre, inspiring, and dangerous. Favorite scripture passages offered meaning and hope to a people in their darkest hours and, at the same time, justified remorseless bloodshed" (4).

Such attempts to connect the Confederacy with Hebrew prophecy did not end with the war. In fact, writes Wilson, the "most wide-ranging prophetic vision related to Confederate defeat did not appear [...] until 1907, when the Mississippi cleric J. W. Sandell published *The*

United States in Scripture” (*Baptized* 64). Sandell’s work, published when Faulkner was ten (and in the same year that Oxford’s Confederate monument was erected), offers loosely based speculations and connections between the prophetic sections of Daniel 7-12 and the history of the Confederacy. Arguing that there “is a symbolic language to Scripture,” Sandell purposes to “illustrate the principal symbols in this Scripture by facts in the United States” (7). Like John of Patmos, or Daniel 7, *The United States in Scripture* begins by directly invoking biblical prophecy: “During the Civil War, while a prisoner on Johnson’s Island, I saw a resemblance in the conflicts North and South, and those recorded in the book of Daniel and the Revelation of St. John. Careful study of the subject has brought greater light and clearer views of it to which attention may now be invited” (6). For instance, Sandell continues, “there is a parallel between the Civil War and that which is recorded in the Book of Daniel, 11th and 12th chapters, of the King of the North and the King of the South, the time and other factors corresponding” (17-18). Most biblical scholarship asserts that these veiled rulers allegorize the conflict between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties that dominated in the Near East at the time of Daniel’s composition, and which the Jews were caught between. Sandell further points out that “Daniel has a beast with ten horns” (6) a symbol that “relate[s] to the development of the characters and powers of [the U.S.] government.” Despite these bizarre numerological claims, Sandell’s attempts to connect parts of Daniel to the Confederacy may have found a receptive audience eager to see a providential dimension to Southern history, since he draws on the time-honored practice of seeking historical parallels in scripture. For Sandell, as for Daniel itself, exact historical fact can be manipulated for artistic effect in pursuit of spiritual insight and reassurance. Sandell is already attuned to the long history of connecting the Confederacy with prophecy and / or biblical stories as a self-evident mode of discourse of accepted truth. His less-than-factual

connections would not matter to a Southern audience long primed to find truth in such discussions. Even Sandell freely admits that it “is not expected that there should be a literal coincidence of time and everything in the prophesies and their illustration” (7). These connections with prophecy illustrate how far Southerners were willing to go in order to argue the righteousness of their cause. If the Confederacy is prophesied about in Daniel, then it is part of God’s plan in history and, therefore, a righteous cause.

Faulkner, too, draws on Daniel in *Absalom* to develop an anti-imperialist critique of the nation, but in a way that significantly differs from the terms of the Lost Cause critique. In Rosa Coldfield, the bitter almost-bride of Thomas Sutpen, we confront Faulkner’s clearest engagement with Lost Cause ideology in *Absalom*. Rosa is the quintessential Lost Cause figure who “established (even if not affirmed) herself as the town’s and the county’s poetess laureate by issuing to the stern and meagre subscription list of the county newspaper poems, ode eulogy and epitaph, out of some bitter and implacable reserve of undefeat” (6). Rosa (not Faulkner) unironically celebrates the mission of the Lost Cause, championing the Southern cause in her cultural work, work that seeks to subvert unwanted influence from an aggressor. In the mind of Lost Cause apologists, the Daniel story is their story, a story of a cultural victory over unwanted imperialistic control by a military power.⁸ When using the trope of the fiery furnace, the user is, of course, the righteous actor in the drama, and the other side is imperial Babylon. However, white supremacy and the return of white rule over newly emancipated blacks were being celebrated in these examples. The passing of Southerners through the “fiery furnace” and their triumph over Northern ideals resulted in a return of oppression against others, a loosening of restrictions that allowed for imperialistic endeavors, not a victory over oppression such as the Hebrews achieved in their fiery furnace experience. Faulkner seems to be exposing such

thinking, linking it with a discourse that “justified remorseless bloodshed” and celebrated racial hegemony. The figure of Thomas Sutpen is key in this critique.

Thomas Sutpen: From Subaltern to Imperialist

Thomas Sutpen transforms from a subaltern (working-class, white trash) into an imperialist (planter, dominator, conqueror of territory) early in his life. Sutpen’s chronological story begins in what would later be called the Appalachian region of Western Virginia. His family decides to come down from the mountains and enter the rigid class structure of planter society. This move brings the Sutpens out of the presumably communal culture of Appalachia into the caste-society of Tidewater Virginia—a “descent from the mountain to the plantation” that Patricia Tobin calls an “Adamic fall from Eden into the real world of experience” (264). As a result, Thomas Sutpen undergoes his first encounter with racism and classism. As he tells it, a family errand carries him to a Tidewater mansion where he is brusquely treated by a slave when he tries to enter through the front door. Instead of going to the back door as commanded, Sutpen retreats to a cave to consider what has happened. He realizes that he is worse off than the slaves on Pettibone’s plantation, who are better clothed and living in better quarters than the poor-white Sutpens. Sutpen resolves to do something; he is just not sure what can or should be done, but at this time he apparently does not want to subject another person to the ridicule he experienced. After pondering revenge fantasies against both the slave and Pettibone, Sutpen decides that if he cannot beat the planters, he will join them. Later in the novel, General Compson summarizes Sutpen’s thought process: “So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with” (192). This decision leads a desperate Sutpen to Haiti, where, through a series of events, he eventually marries, has a son, repudiates the marriage, acquires money and slaves, and

matriculates to Jefferson, Mississippi. In the early 1830s, then, he continues his drive to build a dynasty and to fulfill his design by joining society's upper echelon.

This design is initially meant to be subversive. Owing to his own traumatic experience at the Tidewater mansion, Sutpen resolves he will be different; he will allow all classes to knock and enter the front door, essentially not doing to others what was done to him. Sutpen's experience condenses into the image of a "boy-symbol," a metaphor driving Sutpen's motivation and revenge against the plantation system. This mission would grow into what Jay Watson calls "a counterhegemonic plan to reinvent the plantation space as a utopian space in which the dispossessed and marginal, in the form of the nameless 'boy-symbol' who recapitulates Sutpen's own original lack of status, can be welcomed with open arms through the open door of the Big House—a radically inclusive social vision that has somehow yielded to reaction by the time Sutpen leaves the Caribbean for the Deep South" (70). Once he becomes a planter, Sutpen vows to "take that boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it" (*Absalom* 210). Sutpen wishes to shield those like him against the ignominy he suffered at the Pettibone mansion. Even more than that, writes Dirk Kuyk: "Sutpen is establishing his dynasty in preparation for the moment when 'his turn' will come for a little boy to knock on his door" (18). Calling Sutpen's original motivation "heroic," Kuyk rightly argues that "Sutpen's design would free the boy and his descendants forever from the backwoods brutehood in which Sutpen grew up and from which he raised himself." Along these lines, "Sutpen meant his design to teach society the lesson that those lucky enough to have risen above brutehood should at least care about the feelings of the unlucky" (20). Sutpen would critique plantation society for the ignominies he suffered as he, instead, would "reach down and lift up one of the unlucky, a little boy, a nameless stranger knocking at his door." Sutpen's mission,

argues Kuyk, “may have imagined that the people lucky enough to witness his opening the door, would feel shame at their own hard-heartedness, and change their ways,” in order “to strike at the heart of the patriarchal structure on which not only the southern plantation but also Western culture itself had been based” (21). Sutpen could have shamed plantation society if he had succeeded in this plan. But, Sutpen will fail in his subversive mission in reforming Southern elite society. By contrast, the three Jewish youths of Daniel did not seek to be subversive, they just held to their cultural and religious heritage in the face of oppression. The problem here is that Sutpen uses the racist and classist architecture of new world plantation society to build his subversive design. Sutpen abandons his Appalachian working-class heritage and instead adopts planter ideology: cultural imperialism succeeds in his case where it fails in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s. Playing by their rules in order to combat them dooms Sutpen to ignore the plight of blacks and even women, as evidenced by his treatment of Eulalia and Charles Bon. Sutpen is corrupted by new world plantation society since he engages life on their terms to foster change. They are the imperialists, not the righteous critics of an overbearing imperial order, and Sutpen becomes one himself in trying to combat them.

Initially, Sutpen did not know what to do with his rage at the societal order. Through public education, he learned that “there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous” (195), he tells General Compson. He would learn through this education, then, how to combat the planter class: he would succeed by courage and know-how and make an economic success of himself within the plantation system. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—educated in state-sanctioned ways and involuntarily indoctrinated with Babylonian ideas that ultimately hold no value in their lives—Sutpen learns about imperialism through his state-

endorsed education. As a result, he inadvertently learns about mercantile endeavors going on in the Caribbean, but, unlike the three Jews, voluntarily enters into a colonial world to build his imperial enterprise and promote his own interests.

Sutpen's Caribbean voyages ultimately lead him to Haiti, an island laden with colonial and racial tension, and an island often described in fiery, turbulent volcanic imagery, as firsthand accounts of the Haitian Revolution, popular literature after the fact, and scholarly writing about the island all illustrate. In his *Benito Cereno*, for instance, Herman Melville asks of the ship named after Haiti's colonial title, "[m]ight not the *San Dominick*, like a slumbering volcano, suddenly let loose energies now hid?" (123). Melville's controlling metaphor for Haiti, the ship *San Dominick*, conveys the fears that such energies might erupt in the U.S. since the Haitian Revolution represented Southern planters' deepest fears about racial insurrection. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison also draws on the trope, suggesting of the tensions before the U.S. Civil War that the "scenes of St. Domingo" offered evidence of the "rumblings of a great earthquake—the lava tokens of a heaving volcano!" (in Hunt 154). These writers, like Faulkner, draw on popular accounts of the Haitian Revolution that described its violence in volcanic, apocalyptic terms. In the Southern regional imaginary, Haiti holds special significance as a place that threatens the racial order of plantation society. For Southerners, the threat of a similar upheaval was always bubbling under the surface of their slaves' seeming compliance and peace. Historian Alfred Hunt puts it this way: "Any number of slave plots, real and imagined, were blamed on what happened in St. Domingue. Whether the whites accurately assessed how the Haitians' deeds affected their slaves, St. Domingue gave vivid imagistic life to the South's sense of insecurity" (115). That insecurity lent itself to images of violent upheaval—of eruption and fire.

The lasting image from those accounts is one of vast, widespread flames consuming and destroying the new world plantation system in the rebellion's wake. For example, one anonymous account, "Mon Odyssée," describes the destruction of Cap Hatien, where the "entire city was set ablaze" and the once "flourishing city," was "reduced to ashes" (in Popkin 214). Reminiscent of Pompeii after Vesuvius, another account states that Cap Hatien "went on burning for two more weeks with an unbelievable intensity; the surrounding plain was also set in flames [...] When the fire died down somewhat, I left the *mornes* to return to the town," whereupon, the writer continues, "I found nothing but dead bodies: the streets were strewn with them, all the houses were burned and the streets blocked by their debris" (in Popkin 221-222). The total destruction and overwhelming presence of the flames left many witnesses aghast. In their minds, what the planters hoped was only a momentary protest turned out to be a complete upending of the established regime. The Haitian rebels sought to destroy this order through the cleansing power of fire. When survivors returned (if they returned), they found total destruction; to them, the fires consumed all remnants of the previous colonial order.

Faulkner uses similar imagery in describing Sutpen's ordeal in Haiti. As Sutpen, the planter and his family "huddled in the dark and watched from the windows and barns or granaries or whatever you harvest sugar into, and the fields too, blazing and smoking," the group "could smell it, you could smell nothing else, the rank sweet rich smell as if the hatred and the implacability" of the black rebels "had intensified the smell of the sugar" (200). When later the area "fill[s] with smoke and the smell of burning cane and the glare and smoke of it on the sky and the air throbbing and trembling with the drums and the chanting," Sutpen knows he must react (204). Sutpen, like the witnesses to the destruction of Cap Hatien, experiences the totalizing fury of the flames and the fiery nature of the unrest and destruction on Haiti. Just as

King Nebuchadnezzar orders his fiery furnace hotter than usual, so, too, does Faulkner make the volcano of Haitian rebellion especially intense. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the island represents “a theater for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satantic lusts of human greed and cruelty,” where Sutpen does not know “that what he rode upon was a volcano” (205).

Hunt further observes of the mindset of slaves and abolitionists that if “slave owners did not repent the sin of slavery, Armageddon might come at the hands of vengeful slaves. The message was clear: abolish slavery or suffer the consequences” (3-4). In this fashion, both “real and imagined” slave revolts could be seen as divine retribution, an “Armageddon” against an unjust system—a fiery upheaval that destroys one way of life to begin another. In the same way that death by fiery furnace in the ancient Near East was associated with divine punishment, the threat of the upheaval from the volcano / furnace of Haiti was interpreted by some commentators as divine justice unleashed—a justified vengeful correction against a corrupt system. But where death by fiery furnace comes from on high, the volcano of Haiti erupts from the lower orders against the oppressive regime. The *Absalom* narrator’s image of Sutpen burning in the furnace of the Caribbean hints at a sort of divine punishment for forsaking his initial mission. The novel seems to say of his time in Haiti that Sutpen cannot be stopped physically, but only through a metaphysical consumption by means of his “solitary furnace experience” can he be punished. Returning to Holm, Sutpen seems to illustrate her contention that “[t]he gods may enforce what human jurisdiction cannot; it is the divine world that is called upon to mete out justice via burning for crimes that cannot be punished on earth” (95). In effect, *Absalom, Absalom!* suggests through Rosa that physical harm cannot befall Sutpen; that he has powers placing him beyond physical reproach. The “solitary furnace experience” in Haiti, therefore, imposes a spiritual punishment from God that mortals cannot deliver. The punishment also inverts the divine

intervention in the Daniel text. Since burning was reserved for the highest offenses, such a punishment becomes necessary for Sutpen when he offends the divine order in departing from his initial subversive plan to become an oppressor instead. In the Daniel text, God intervenes to save those deemed righteous in their defiance. In *Absalom, Absalom!* God intervenes to punish those smitten with power. For Ashli White, “[i]n trying to encapsulate the nature of the [Haitian Revolution], white observers in the colonies often called it a ‘volcano,’ equating black and colored soldiers to a powerful, unpredictable, and destructive force of nature (rather than civilization) that was impossible for any man—no matter how honorable—to contain” (57). Yet, Sutpen appears able to contain just such unpredictable forces through sheer will, thus adding to his seemingly superhuman qualities and necessitating divine intervention to stop him.

Amidst this backdrop of flames, violence, and smoke, then, Sutpen willingly enters the “furnace” of Haiti alone, violently subduing the Haitians through his indomitable will to succeed and build his dynasty. For Richard Godden, Sutpen’s surprising success comes “by demonstrating ‘white supremacy,’” in which “[w]hite proves stronger than black and causes black to vanish” (51). Faulkner, through General Compson, writes that Sutpen simply

went out and subdued them [...] He just put the musket down and had someone unbar the door and then bar it behind him, and walked out into the darkness and subdued them, maybe by yelling louder, maybe by standing, bearing more than they believed any bones and flesh could or should (should, yes: that would be the terrible thing: to find flesh to stand more than flesh should be asked to stand); maybe at last they themselves turning in horror and fleeing from the white arms and legs shaped like theirs and from which blood could be made to spurt and flow as it could from theirs and containing an indomitable spirit which could not have,

could not possibly have (he showed Grandfather the scars, one of which, Grandfather said, came pretty near leaving him that virgin for the rest of his life too) and then daylight came with no drums in it for the first time in eight days, and they emerged (probably the man and the daughter) and walked across the burned land with the bright sun shining down on it as if nothing had happened, walking now in what must have been an incredible desolate solitude and peaceful quiet, and found him and brought him to the house: and when he recovered he and the girl were engaged. (204-205)

Instead of helping laborers from his own class background as he initially set out to do, Sutpen is now helping the planter class triumph over them. What is more, he thereby advances his own agenda at the expense of the poor blacks, ultimately graduating from overseer of someone else's plantation to master of his own. In fact, Sutpen delivers himself and the plantation elite, not the rebelling laborers, from the fiery furnace of Haiti. This decision undoes his supposed "innocence." Instead of being thrown into the furnace for standing against tyranny, Sutpen willingly enters it in helping to perpetuate tyranny, using the moment as his own entrée into the ruling elite. Even though he emerges victorious, allowing him to enact his design, whatever "innocence" Sutpen brought with him from Virginia is consumed in the experience. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are saved in their defiance, yet Sutpen is figuratively consumed in his decision to join the oppressors as his furnace moment forges an imperialist figure. In fact, the solitariness of Sutpen's ordeal is another important element that sets him apart from the heroes of the Daniel story. Instead of taking communal action to resist cultural transformation, Sutpen engages in ruthless self-advancement. It is as if the naked individualism that underlies his Design stands in for the shared belief of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as the driving faith that

brings him through his version of the “furnace experience.”

Not too long after this formative moment, Sutpen enters Jefferson, Mississippi, to begin his dynasty. He may think he is the same figure who plotted his subversive mission against the planter class that rejected him, but he is no longer that person. Aware that something is wrong with Sutpen, the town narrator links his trope of the furnace experience with the motif of illness, some unspecified malady that “was more than just a fever” (24). “He had apparently come into town from the south—a man of about twenty-five as the town learned later, because at the time his age could not have been guessed because at that time he looked like a man who had been sick,” the narrator suggests. “Not like a man who had been peacefully ill in bed and had recovered,” he continues, but “like a man who had been through some solitary furnace experience, which was more than just a fever” (24).

This reference to fever is telling. As White observes, “[a]mong slaveholders in the Atlantic world, one of the common tropes used in describing slave revolts was ‘contagion,’” in which the “term likened an insurrection of the enslaved to an unpredictable and voracious malady, spreading quickly and striking the innocent without warning.” This “figurative equation of contagious diseases with slave rebellions, including the Haitian Revolution,” she continues, “has many implications [...] provid[ing] an interesting point of entry for considering how populations reacted to slave rebellion” (124). Even though the Jefferson community does not know Sutpen’s history, it can sense the contagious legacy of his experience with black rebellion in the Caribbean. As such, Sutpen warrants the reaction of distance and mistrust that he receives from Jefferson. White further explains that “extending the metaphor of contagion produces a more nuanced interpretation of fear in action, one that includes not only terror and flight but also efforts to control or mitigate the potential dangers of exposure to rebellion” (125). Sutpen’s

aloofness leaves him free to choose “the only gesture he could think of to impress his disapproval on those” (*Absalom* 204) who shunned him: Sutpen would relish the distance as a badge of honor.

This critique reveals that Sutpen is not Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but Nebuchadnezzar, the imperialist under critique in the Daniel story. Even though these figures share similar youthful experiences with oppression and struggle, their responses and trajectories are quite different. Indeed, though Sutpen’s rise from poor white to planter would not be out of place in the Hebrew court tale genre, in which an alien, usually a Jewish courtier, surprisingly rises to prominence in the ranks of a foreign court (see Joseph, Moses, and Esther for examples), his trajectory is inverted: instead of teaching the empire a lesson in righteousness and justice, the former subaltern becomes an imperialist.

In fact, just as Sutpen thought himself a righteous figure that was going to bring about change, King Nebuchadnezzar was initially called to be an agent of divinely ordained punishment against a straying Israel to bring them back into proper worship. His attack on Israel was supposed to lead to repentance and change within Israel—it was supposed to be a shocking event used to call them back to God. Similarly, Sutpen’s original mindset was to transform the plantation order into something more egalitarian in its inclusiveness. His “attack” on plantation society was meant to enact reform and shame planters into being more accepting of the lower orders. However, both figures turn oppressive in their dynastic quests. John Sykes argues that “Sutpen helped to create” the culture he set out to reform; “he is, in the full sense, a progenitor,” (33). Sutpen thus “reveals the governing assumptions of Southern culture in their ugly essence. From the very beginning of his project,” Sykes continues, “Sutpen pledges himself to the acquisition of what his society values most: the ownership of a plantation, the possession of

slaves, the manners and style of a gentleman, and a suitable wife and heir.” His only goal is thus “to win at the game which he feels forced to play, to be acknowledged as a master and therefore as an autonomous human being” (39). Just as Nebuchadnezzar does not see how empire creates his own hubris, Sutpen loses sight of what the “game” of plantation mastery does to him. As Taylor Hagood writes, the “complex mythic layering” (169) of Sutpen’s legend evokes numerous “imperial projects to which the imperializer is blind” (161). Sutpen, writes Godden, “can raise the Hundred because, having experienced slavery as the suppression of revolution, he can, in his own defense, displace his knowledge that the master’s mastery depends upon the body and the consciousness of the bound man” (63). Only by exercising dominance over others is Sutpen able to build his dynasty—an empire built on blood and human lives exploited for his own gain. Remembering Brueggemann’s claim that Nebuchadnezzar is a “cipher for all pretentious worldly power” (*Theology* 239), Sutpen seems an analogous cipher in his position as a progenitor of plantation culture who remains blind to his own imperial projects.

Sutpen’s design and intent regarding Sutpen’s Hundred is not unlike Nebuchadnezzar’s scheme to build the golden stele—the event that touched off the Jews’ resistance to imperial overreach in the first place. Just as, in Shane Kirkpatrick’s words “Nebuchadnezzar’s enormous golden statue [...] serves to display his claim to worth and to rule” (102), Sutpen’s Hundred functions as a self-aggrandizing display meant to surprise his neighbors into shock and awe at his planter status. Jerome J. Neyrey describes Nebuchadnezzar’s move to build the statue in these terms: “those who display wealth claim honor because they are ‘ostentatious and pretentious.’” As such, “[w]ealth [...] symbolizes one’s status to friends and neighbors; it claims for its possessors respect and worth as powerful persons who act as patrons to others and who deserve to rule. But wealth is not wealth and cannot symbolize one’s worth and honor unless it is

displayed” (23-24). Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue was meant to inspire fear, wonder, and terror in his subjects. The statue was also one of the largest edifices around, not unlike Sutpen’s Hundred in Yoknapatawpha County. Daniel Spoth writes of the house that “[i]t is an extension of Sutpen’s will, not just as means to, but a participation in, his grand scheme” (121). Even the gaudy amount of land he purchased was acquired to impress Jefferson by its sheer magnitude. When Sutpen gets around to building the home itself he envisions something on a grand scale, something that, like Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, will legitimize his power in the community.

Mr. Compson tells Quentin “[t]hat only an artist could have borne Sutpen’s ruthlessness and hurry and still manage to curb the dream of grim and castle-like magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed, since the place as Sutpen planned it would have been almost as large as Jefferson itself at the time” (29). Sutpen’s idea for his homestead rivals the entirety of the town since his plan would have created the largest object in the surrounding area as a symbol both of his place in and of his antagonism towards the Jefferson community. Spoth maintains that “[t]he house represents both eminence and endurance to Sutpen; he erects it not only as a device for the creation of his reputation, but as an indelible mark on the landscape, something that will persist into perpetuity” (121).

Neither the statue nor the dynasty, however, lasts. Despite previous checks on his pride, King Nebuchadnezzar does not learn his lesson, and hubris again stains his actions. After interpreting another troubling dream that suggests Nebuchadnezzar will lose his realm, Daniel offers a potential reversal of the prophecy: “break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity” (Daniel 4: 27). Looking out over his realm, however, Nebuchadnezzar takes pride in his accomplishments. Instead of acknowledging the role of the God of the Israelites in his success, the king takes the

credit for himself: “The king spake, and said, Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?” (Dan. 4: 30-31). Whereupon “there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee” (Dan. 4: 31). Nebuchadnezzar’s empire (and later his sanity) is taken away because he either refuses or forgets to honor God’s role in his empire building and because he additionally mistreats the poor. As a result, Nebuchadnezzar is stricken mad and lives like an animal, eating grass and unable to communicate with people. Rosa similarly notes Sutpen’s descent into madness and pride after his return from the Civil War: “I watched him, watched his old man’s solitary fury fighting now not with the stubborn yet slowly tractable earth as it had done before, but now against the ponderable weight of the changed new time itself as though he were trying to dam a river with his bare hands and a shingle: and this for the same spurious delusion of reward” (130). Shortly afterward, describing Sutpen’s fruitless efforts to run a country store, she calls him a “[m]ad impotent old man” (148). In this way, Sutpen comes to resemble the fallen and mad Babylonian king who has lost his sanity and empire as a result of his pride and injustice. According to the Daniel writer(s), it is God who gave Israel over to the king in the first place, so his pride makes him a target of divine wrath. Similarly, in the ruthless way he goes about acquiring the necessary elements of his design, Sutpen forges his dynasty without consideration or consequence for those around him. All parties are drawn inexorably by his will into his grand design. Just as Sutpen’s own fall comes at the hands of his sons, it is King Nebuchadnezzar’s son Belshazzar who experiences the famous “writing on the wall” scene that Daniel interprets as the death knell for Nebuchadnezzar’s line, a sign that the Babylonian empire will be given over to the Medes and Persians.⁹ Clearly, Sutpen is more like the ruthless imperialist in the Daniel story than like the Israelites who stood against

King Nebuchadnezzar's monomaniacal plans. Citing slavery as the "economic edifice" on which Southern society (and Sutpen's Hundred) is built—not "on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (204)—Faulkner critiques the planter-class and Sutpen.

A return to the "trouble" of Sutpen's "innocence" (178) illustrates another critique of the planter-class and U.S. empire. In fact, Sutpen is the imperialist as American: through him Faulkner exposes national "innocence" as a screen for empire and conquest. According to General Compson, Sutpen "didn't even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others" (178-179). Instead, Sutpen "just thought that some people were spawned in one place and some in another, some spawned rich (lucky, he may have called it: or maybe he called lucky, rich) and some not"; indeed, "it had never once occurred to him that any man should take any such blind accident as that as authority or warrant to look down at others, any others. So he had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it" (180). His Tidewater experience begins to shatter those notions. Sutpen learns that his initial thinking is incorrect: people are not necessarily born rich or poor but acquire riches, land, and (human) property through their own designs. He was naïve, innocent.

However, "innocence" in this context is a loaded term that is linked to the United States' own perceived innocence about its mission in the world. William Lindsey argues that "the Enlightenment myth of innocence has taken particularly virulent forms in American culture. One of the central problematics of twentieth-century American political thought has been to expose how this myth underlies the messianism that often informs American foreign policy" (94).

Sutpen seems to view himself in similarly messianic terms as he would “save” the boy-symbol through his dynastic design. Lindsey further points out that as “critics of this messianic mentality have noted, American foreign policy commonly presupposes that American motives with regard to other countries are aseptic, when in fact American policy sometimes serves the interests of this country better than those of countries Americans regard themselves as charged to ‘save’” (94). For Lindsey, the idea of American innocence is suspect from the start, a belief that actually clouded ideas about the nation’s role in foreign affairs. Likewise, Sutpen’s initial mission was to beat the planters at their own game by creating an inclusive form of plantocracy, and thus, in a way, to “save” the lower classes from the ignominy he experiences at their hands. Of course, Sutpen fails in this saving mission. Charles Bon, Sutpen’s son from his first, denounced wife, is repudiated and later killed at the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred. Wash Jones, the closest comparison to Sutpen’s own origins, is denied entrance to the big house. Sutpen never comes close to achieving his high ideals. His messianic mission is troubled from the start since power does indeed corrupt—his attempts to save the boy-symbol become mired in self-interest.

Indeed, Sutpen’s experience in Haiti, the site of his “furnace experience,” illustrates this. Not only does Sutpen’s fail in his mission of uplift, but Faulkner points to a similarly flawed U.S. mission in Haiti over the years running up to the composition of *Absalom*. What Sutpen saw as an innocent mission to right wrongs quickly became an opportunity for self-advancement. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were divinely rewarded for resisting imperial authority, but Sutpen is punished because he proves to be an agent of tyranny. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (and Daniel) are willing to work for the state and to be a part of a national project, but only to a degree. They will not sacrifice their core beliefs to state purposes. Sutpen, on the other hand, ends up compromising his own mission in service to a cultural project of domination in

Haiti, thus revealing his imperialist bent.

More than this, however, Faulkner critiques the nation's interest in its own supposed "innocence." Sutpen's story is important to national narratives because, as Lindsey rightly points out, "the story of this self-made man becomes a story about how attempts to create order tend to go tragically awry, when they derive from a facile assumption of human innocence and of the unambiguous power of human rationality to calculate what is good" (86). Additionally, Hosam Aboul-Ela sees Sutpen as a national figure "comparable to Jay Gatsby in the way he mutually embodies and critiques the American dream" (485). In this way, Sutpen is condemned by the Jefferson community for having the audacity (or the ignorance) to be so matter of fact about how his, and the planter class's, wealth is acquired. Sutpen makes no mystery that exploitation of slaves and of Native Americans allows whites to rise in the frontier of 1830s Mississippi. He also exposes the fantasy of genteel ancestry to which many Jeffersonians adhered. Thus, Sutpen simultaneously critiques and embodies the planter ideals—a critique of the South that does not exempt or legitimize it from, but also includes it in, the nation.

Sutpen's origins in Virginia cast him as a national figure linked to the mythic origins of America. What would be called the Appalachia region was viewed in several instances of nineteenth century travel literature as almost a pre-American place—a kind of time machine where an American could see what life was like before the revolution. Ronald Lewis maintains that all the myths about Appalachia that would inspire further travel writing and impact the national psyche come from William Frost's essay "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains." According to Lewis, Frost presents Appalachians as "'eighteenth century neighbors' who had just been awakened from a long 'Rip Van Winkle sleep,'" "pure Anglo-Saxons 'beleaguered by nature' in "'Appalachian America,' one of 'God's grand divisions'" (21).

Sutpen leaves this idyllic national fantasy-space for the rigid caste system of the Tidewater. Despite Quentin Compson's attempts to dissociate Sutpen from the U.S. South and Shreve's insistence that Sutpen came from Virginia, these pre-American foundational myths still inform Sutpen's make-up, fashioning him as at once Southern and national. Thus, "Sutpen's story is the story of the nation: in critiquing Sutpen's achievements, Faulkner is implicitly questioning the myths by which the American people live" (Lindsey 86). Lindsey additionally characterizes the "Sutpen story [as] a commentary on American expansionism," in which what "happens to Sutpen is a warning against those who seek to conquer secure in the assumption of their innocence. Such expansionism—whether it be an expansion that annexes more land or that subjects other people to a dominant culture—easily translates into exploitation of nature and domination of others" (97). Sutpen serves Faulkner as a national figure whose actions renew the "economic imperialistic drives" not of a messianic national order but of an empire building nation-state, a Nebuchadnezzar.

The U.S. Occupation of Haiti

Haiti, then, offers a specific contemporary framework that reveals the U.S. as an imperialist oppressor. In a spirit of growing competition with European powers in their pursuit of empire, the United States sought hegemony in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Drawing on Alfred Thayer Mahan's ideas about sea power as a necessary instrument of global dominance, imperialistic thinkers in the U.S. looked for areas in which to build naval bases to protect sea lanes and trade, and, most importantly, to protect their investment in and use of the Panama Canal against foreign threats. With this in mind, the U.S. turned to Haiti. The U.S. Navy and Marines landed on Haiti in January of 1915 under the auspices of maintaining stability in a

rapidly declining political situation—between 1911 and 1915, a series of coups and assassination attempts racked the country as six presidents held office during this period all under the threat of further coups. Additionally, the United States wanted to get involved in Haiti to secure U.S. economic investment on the island as the U.S. government feared Haiti would default on its loans. The unstated goal, however, was to remove German influence in the island—an influence the U.S. feared would lead to a German economic advantage in the Caribbean and a naval presence on the island that might threaten U.S. naval security in the area as the nations moved closer to war. The Marines quickly established complete military control by the fall of 1915 and established a plebiscite government. From there, the U.S. disbanded the Haitian National Assembly in 1917, established a new constitution friendly to U.S. interests, and then attempted to improve the infrastructure of Haiti through building roads, hospitals, and public buildings. In fact, though, historian Hans Schmidt argues that the “dominant theme of the American presence in Haiti was materialistic rather than idealistic” (13). After the U.S. occupation achieved these initial aims, neglect set in, and after failed attempts to restructure U.S. involvement in Haiti, riots erupted in 1929 that led to the eventual withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the island by 1934. The U.S. had to secure its economic interests in Haiti before it could leave. Despite these materialistic interests and aims, the U.S. did offer a rhetoric of uplift for Haiti in justification for its governmental and militaristic presence, and economic interests. According to this rhetoric, the U.S. would not only improve the island’s infrastructure, but would introduce new technology and, eventually, democracy to the people so as to “pull Haiti up by the bootstraps,” if only “Haitians would follow the formula of the American success story” (155).

The U.S. also offered a rhetoric of paternalistic care for its “orphaned” Haitian brothers—a rhetoric not unlike Sutpen’s perceived “boy-symbol” metaphor. The U.S. saw itself as a big

brother / father-figure that would adopt and help the lesser brother of Haiti.¹⁰ If discipline was needed to accomplish that task, so be it. In fact, Sara Gerend—building on Ladd’s, Godden’s and others’ work on U.S. imperialism, Faulkner, and Haiti—illustrates the paternalistic nature of the U.S. desire to “save” the orphan child Haiti expressed in imperialistic rhetoric. Examining a political cartoon entitled “The Missionary” that encouraged Marines to view Haiti as a dependent child, Gerend writes that just as “U.S. Marines and ordinary American citizens were taught to imagine the poor black island nation as an orphan in need of adult male guidance [...] Quentin and Shreve visualize Haiti as a deserted son who craves nothing more than the American father’s paternal recognition.” As such, the novel “clearly dramatizes America’s paternalist ideology regarding Haiti and emerges as a significant text in the culture of early twentieth-century U.S. empire” (18) in which a white father refuses to acknowledge a Haitian orphan. In his paternalistic relation to Bon, Sutpen is clearly a failure, refusing to acknowledge that Bon is his son and exposing his black ancestry to Henry in order to oust Bon from their lives. Unlike Quentin and Shreve, Sutpen views Haiti as a means to launch his dynasty—he has no illusions about uplift. In fact, Sutpen, like many American individuals and investors of the occupation years, becomes rich through his association with the Caribbean. Rather than holding to the ties developed there, however, Sutpen quickly dissociates himself. One of those ties is Bon, but this “boy-symbol” of Haiti is cast aside without much thought. The warning, then, is that for all its messianic rhetoric, the U.S. might do likewise: abandon those in need once it has gained what it wants (which by 1934, it had done to Haiti).

This positive uplift largely failed, though. Racism, paternalism, and deep cultural clashes between the U.S. and the Haitian elites and peasants doomed the occupation from the start. The U.S. was blind to (or did not care about) its own racist underpinnings in treating its “adopted”

Haitians. As Marines and other Americans landed on the island, they brought with them racist preoccupations and Nativist distrust of foreign peoples. Additionally, they deemed the people—elite and peasant alike—either as too ignorant to participate in democracy or as “savages” unfit for civilization. For example, historian Lester Langley writes that when “American marines landed in 1915 they brought concepts of racial discrimination that had not held sway in Haiti since the white French colonials were driven out a hundred years before” (136). The Marines often “bragged about their cavalier treatment of Haitians, disparag[ing] them as ‘niggers’ and ‘gooks’” (139). Booker T. Washington recognized the racist underpinnings from the outset. Writing in the *Outlook* in 1915, he argued that the “average American white man, army officer, navy officer, white soldier, nor white marine is fitted to work” with the Haitians because the “racial lines drawn in this and other countries will not be tolerated in Haiti” (681). Instead, Haitians would resist, thus making the U.S. mission more difficult (which they did). He also critiques the uplift rhetoric as false, writing that “it is one thing to conquer a people through unselfish interest in their welfare, and another thing to conquer them through the shotgun.” Washington leaves no doubt as to what side the U.S. falls on, suggesting that “[s]hooting civilization into the Haitians on their own soil will be an amazing spectacle” (681). In short, the supposedly humanitarian U.S. effort failed to recognize the Haitians’ humanity in its pursuit of economic and military gains. Likewise, Thomas Sutpen ignores the humanity of the less fortunate in his dynastic pursuits. In this light, Faulkner’s Daniel reference links Sutpen and the interwar U.S. as Nebuchadnezzars in Haiti.

Another problem with the occupation, Faulkner suggests through Sutpen, is the self-serving nature of the supposed mission of uplift. American investment in the island was built not on charity, but “largely on the expectation that American private investors would finance and

direct economic development,” especially in banking, trade, and customs houses (Langley 168). These investors also sought to find coal, iron, and other precious metals in Haiti to benefit U.S. companies and to fuel U.S. industry at home. They also hoped to foster (and invest in) Haitian-based factories and mines in the process. This policy was built on the hope of reaping profits from that investment, not on philanthropic interest. However, U.S. investors quickly realized that “Haiti simply was not a rich country and had little to offer that could draw American investors from more lucrative opportunities elsewhere” (171). Yet, U.S. forces needed to stay on the island to secure what was invested before they could withdraw. Sutpen’s treatment of Bon echoes the self-serving nature of the U.S. occupation. For Sutpen, Bon was no longer useful to him once he found out about Bon’s black blood—he could no longer expect a return on his “investment.” I agree with Kuyk, who argues that if Sutpen had remained with his first wife, his subversive mission in Mississippi would be invalid to a white supremacist society that could easily reject Sutpen’s attempts to shame them since he was not following their racial codes (26-27). Sutpen needs a racially pure marriage in order to effect the change he wants and is perfectly willing to cast his first family aside once he realizes his “investment” in them will not garner the return he desires—he is too mercenary in his treatment of other people.

Additionally, the model of uplift the U.S. sought to implement was grounded in its own idea of improvement, not Haitian ideals. “U.S. policy makers,” Mary Renda points out, “sought to create an infrastructure to serve as the foundation for economic development and modernization” (10). This development and modernization was antithetical to Haitian interest, especially in utilizing forced labor to achieve its aims, which smacked of Haiti’s colonial past. The U.S. sought to modernize Haiti’s infrastructure by building roads, bridges, buildings, etc. while creating a wage-based, international market economy. However, these aims and policies

flew in the face of Haiti's preferred subsistence-based, local economy and culture. Haitians preferred this style as it allowed them more leisure and perceived control over their own lives—what they considered the good life was not the same as what the United States did. Haitians resented the wage-labor capitalist system since it reminded them too much of plantation slavery and threatened their perceived independence. What is more, the forced labor used to improve Haiti enraged and humiliated the peasantry, even though the new infrastructure created a vast network of roads and many civic buildings. Haitian peasants, who “prized their independence [...] feared the return of slavery at the hand of white men” (Schmidt 101) and resented the work. The workers were often chained together, too, further evoking reminders of the colonial past (and the forced convict labor in the U.S. of this period). Underpinning all of this was the “unabashed racism of many Marine Corps officers and enlisted men, and the outright brutality of the forced labor system implemented to carry out building projects,” both of which “galvanized the population in opposition to U.S. presence” (Renda 11).

Faulkner's critique of Sutpen / U.S. involvement in Haiti thus reveals that neither Sutpen nor the U.S. is the righteous actor it thinks itself—the fiery furnace of Haiti reveals the imperialist nature of both, and the adversity of the furnace experience leaves each worse off. The fiery furnace trope suggests that those being tested by adversity will emerge from the “furnace” better off than they were before if they remain true to their cause. Yet the Daniel text also suggests that only the righteous person subverting imperialism can do this. The U.S. mission in Haiti, despite its uplift rhetoric, was built on “racial fantasies, economic interests, and strategic requirements” in the Caribbean (Langley 68), not on selfless humanitarian aid. The U.S. was interested in utilizing Haiti for its own needs, including its needs to fashion an idea about itself as a righteous actor in the world. Just as Nebuchadnezzar is to the furnace, and Sutpen is to the

volcano, the U.S. is to Haiti. In each case, the latter, subaltern space functions as a crucible for the critique of empire, a space where the contradictions of imperialism emerge in full view. *Absalom* reveals that the U.S. occupation of Haiti is a racist, paternalistic, self-serving fantasy, like Sutpen's design to subvert the planter class.

The Bible has much to say about the righteous becoming oppressors. The same Babylonian empire used as an instrument of God's punishment against wayward Israel, for example, became an object of God's wrath as a result of its arrogance and the oppressive measures it later undertook. The Biblical message can be interpreted as a both-and proposition. The Bible speaks a message of hope for future redemption for those suffering oppression, and shows how imperialists are used to carry out God's plan. But once the tables are turned and the oppressed become liberated and in charge of others, or if the imperial actor goes too far, the Bible also warns of God's judgment; the once oppressed can become the oppressor and the instrument of God's judgment can go too far in its punishment of a straying Israel. R. S. Sugirtharajah argues that in the Bible "[e]mpires are raised as a scourge to punish wicked nations and in turn they themselves are punished for oppressive measures which affect the subjugated nations." "The Hebrew scriptures," he continues "seem to suggest that empires, because of their military strength and the power that comes with it, are more than likely to behave arrogantly. Discrimination, oppression, inhumanity, cruelty, and all forms of barbarity are not less barbarous because they are carried out by nations chosen as God's instrument." As a result, those "who seek biblical support for the messianic role of empires do well to realize that the same Bible has another harrowing message. Empires are an unreliable way of solving the world's problems, and those who take the sword will inevitably die by it" (*Bible and Empire* 190-191). This idea is fully realized in King Nebuchadnezzar in his dealings with Jewish subjects. Sutpen's similarly

compromised mission was to allow people like Wash Jones into the manor house without sending them to the back door. Instead, he illustrates the oppression, discrimination, inhumanity and cruelty that Sugirtharajah says are characteristic of tyrants and empires. “Stand back. Don’t you touch me” (231), Sutpen warns the outraged and desperate Jones, who wants to exact revenge against Sutpen for fathering a child with Jones’s granddaughter, Milly, and then abandoning mother and child. Sutpen does indeed die by the sword—or more precisely by the scythe—cut down by a representative of the very class he once sought to uplift. Wash Jones may have once viewed Sutpen in almost god-like terms, but that doesn’t stop him from rising up in violence against him. This reversal could be seen as a cautionary tale for U.S. imperialists, a reminder that those who are supposed to be saved under the nation’s messianic mission might falter in their worship of the imperial master and rise in violence themselves, exposing the dangerous faith in American individualism and self-aggrandizement in the process.

Sutpen, as a national figure, fails in his messianic mission because he becomes an imperialist. Whereas Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego challenge imperial authority by holding to their most sacred beliefs as Hebrews, Sutpen is burned up in his “solitary furnace experience” because he becomes a tyrant who sacrifices his beliefs and the imagined egalitarian elements of his Appalachian, pre-American origins to a vision of power and riches. Daniel’s themes reflect those in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner, writing within, about, and for a biblically literate community, presents Sutpen as the opposite of the heroes of Daniel, as a critique of the nation’s imperialist vision of foreign affairs. Sutpen’s career illustrates how a monomaniacal drive for economic improvement results in a betrayal of the biblical mandate against oppressive, hubristic empire. The mythic layering already present in Faulkner studies aligns Sutpen with such people

as King David, Agamemnon and King Arthur, empire builders who became “victimizers victimized” (Hagood 175). Thus, it seems the Coen brothers were right after all: Faulkner adds one more empire builder, King Nebuchadnezzar, to the underlying ethos informing the figure of Thomas Sutpen.

Endnotes

¹ See Ralph Berens' "Collapse of Dynasty: the Thematic Center of *Absalom, Absalom!*", Scott Chancellor's dissertation "William Faulkner's Hebrew Bible," Taylor Hagood's *Faulkner's Imperialism*, and Rebecca Saunders' *Lamentations and Modernity* as some examples.

² Even though these are their given Babylonian names and not their Jewish names, they still represent how the three are commonly described in scholarly, Jewish, and Christian scholarship despite the obvious imperial nature of the name change by the Babylonian court. I use them in keeping with scholarly tradition as well.

³ The narrator, of course, cannot use Lost Cause mythology at the time of Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson in the 1830s. Faulkner can, however, and it is my argument that Lost Cause thinking that utilizes Daniel seems to have influenced Faulkner's use of this strange phrase.

⁴ Donald Kartiganer in *Faulkner and His Critics* rightly associates the phrase, and narrator's subsequent description of Sutpen, with Sutpen's time in Haiti but does not comment on any potential link between Daniel, the fiery furnace, Haiti, and Sutpen's acceptance of worldly benefit contra the three Israelites in Daniel.

⁵ The treatment of Sutpen's time in Haiti in *Absalom, Absalom!* is, of course, problematic given potential inaccuracies or anachronisms. Faulkner places Sutpen into Haiti well after the Haitian Revolution, at a time when Haiti no longer utilized the plantation system, let alone allowed foreigners to own land and operate under such a system. Perhaps like Daniel's own historical inaccuracies and anachronisms, Faulkner mistreats history for his own artistic ends as he was certainly aware of the discrepancy.

⁶ In fact, this move is like Orlando Patterson's idea of "natal alienation," a key element of the "social death" of slavery (8). According to Patterson, "the loss of ties of birth" creates an

“alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood,’ and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master” (7).

⁷ See Richard Godden’s “*Absalom, Absalom!*, Haiti and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions,” John T. Matthews’ “Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back”, T. E. Connolly’s “Point of View in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” and Godden’s “*Absalom, Absalom!* and Faulkner’s Erroneous Dating of the Haitian Revolution” as a few examples of the critical exploration of Faulkner’s anachronism.

⁸ Since Rosa is not the source of the scriptural allusion to Daniel, her role in Lost Cause ideology is not fully examined here. Additionally, neither am I fully exploring the whole of Lost Cause ideology in this chapter since that project is not always connected directly to Daniel. I focus only on Lost Cause / Southern connections to the Daniel text.

⁹ This is one instance where the Daniel text seems to be taking liberties with history. According to several sources, Belshazzar is not actually Nebuchadnezzar’s son, and is likely from a different ruling line altogether. It should be noted, though, as Valeta and others point out, that this anachronism (and others in Daniel) may be a purposeful literary device.

¹⁰ Two examples from servicemen who went to Haiti: 1) Marine Faustian Wirkus said the mission was “being father and big brother to [...] our Haitian friends.” 2) General Smedley Butler said “we are the trustees of a huge estate that belonged to minors. [...] The Haitians were our wards and we were endeavoring to make for them a rich and productive property, to be turned over to them at such a time as our government saw fit” (both quoted in Renda 13).

IV. DRY BONES IN THE VALLEY:

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *JONAH'S GOURD VINE*

In July of 1970, gang members on Chicago's South Side burned down the Woodlawn Mennonite Church, then pastored by Reverend Curtis Burrell. Members from the Black P Stone Nation street gang were angry that some of their members had been fired from Burrell's Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) earlier that summer. Burrell had tried to bridge the gap of violence plaguing the community and to create positive relationships on Chicago's notorious South Side by including known gang members in his religiously based benevolent organization. However, the gang members "tended to intimidate visitors, and the organization's staff," and "disrupted meetings and became insolent" (Siddon 7). Burrell later said, "the gang members just weren't doing the work they were supposed to" (7). Instead, they "were not interested in the welfare of the community but only in squeezing what money they could from the community" (7) and from their "fellow blacks" ("Bullets Fly" 6), Burrell later added. Left with no choice, the exasperated Burrell fired the gang members. With tensions mounting between the KOCO organizers (of which Burrell was president) and the Stones over real and symbolic control of the Kenwood-Oakland neighborhood, gang violence in the community increased, with KOCO targeted specifically. The community leaders responded with "peace walks" in the neighborhood. Rev. John Barber, a KOCO supporter, then issued a "virtual declaration of war against 'criminal elements' in the Black P Stone Nation street gang," with Barber "warn[ing] gang leaders to abandon their attempts to control the black neighborhood"

(Jones 2). Throughout the tension-filled summer, shots were fired on several occasions at Burrell's home, office, and church, with police and Burrell's personal bodyguards returning fire in many instances. No injuries were directly reported from the shootings, and the gang escalated their attacks and fire-bombed the Woodlawn Mennonite church in July of 1970, hoping to kill Burrell in the process. The resulting fire-bombing did burn down the church but did not succeed in assassinating Burrell.

Undaunted, Burrell continued to denounce Chicago's street gangs, and tensions escalated even more. Burrell next invited Rev. Jesse Jackson to preach that Sunday's sermon. Jackson agreed, and—in a move to foster a significant turnout—he advertised to the Black community that he was going to preach a “Dry Bones” sermon. According to Grace Sims Holt, “the *mere mention* of ‘Dry Bones’ produced maximum attendance and participation that Sunday” (202; emphasis added). Why? Well, the mention of a Dry Bones sermon, according to Holt, “was a signal to the black community that an *overriding* and *urgent* social issue was going to be discussed” (202; emphasis added). Additionally, she points out that for blacks in the U.S. “one theme has been invariant—namely, that conflicts within the black community arise out of the social conditions under which black people are forced to live and that such conflicts produce divisions which aid and abet The Man in his efforts to keep black people down” (202). Holt argues, therefore, that “one of the chief goals of the preacher through the use of the ‘Dry Bones’ sermon is to supplant inhuman white authority with religious black authority where white authority is declared unjust and un-Christian” and the “authority of the black church is declared the only just authority for black people. Listeners are inspired, impressed, and challenged to aspire to *loftier* means and ends, to move from the ‘Dry Bones valley’ of degradation and internal social conflict to the ‘garden humanity’ of the *mountain*” (202; emphasis added). Here,

Holt articulates how presentist the Dry Bones sermon is to the black community—how much it fights against injustice, and how much it blames even internal conflict on outside oppression. In this case, the de-facto Jim Crow real estate practices of the mid to late twentieth century, lack of economic opportunity, and general racism divided the community from the outside and, ultimately, indirectly caused the issues between the KOCO and the Stones street gang.¹ Holt further explains that “the ‘Dry Bones’ sermon is a ritual within the black church” that “functioned as a unifying force within the black community [...] designed especially to bridge class lines and overcome divisive factionalism.” Knowing this tradition, and curious to hear how Jackson would use the Dry Bones sermon to overcome “divisive factionalism” on the South Side, the African-American community turned out in large numbers to hear Jackson speak in a makeshift, open-air church since, of course, Burrell’s church had been destroyed the week before (Holt 202).

What is more, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton argue that racial segregation such as the type practiced in Chicago is “antithetical and often hostile to success in the larger economy” (8). They argue that racial segregation “enabl[es] all other forms of racial oppression. Racial segregation is the institutional apparatus that supports other racially discriminatory processes and binds them together into a coherent and uniquely effective system of racial subordination” (8). This then becomes “responsible for the perpetuation of black poverty in the United States” (9). Jackson viewed the situation in Chicago in this way too. His Dry Bones sermon wonders “if you just walkin’ up and down the streets in the ghetto, you get frustrated talkin’ bout the *effect* and you *never* get to the cause. *The effect is*, an illiterate and semi-literate people. *The effect is*, babies dying. *The effect is*,” he continues, “father fighting sons, *and* mother fighting daughters, *and* confusion in the household *and*, burning the church *and*, glorifying the corner” (in Holt

203). Jackson alludes to the events that brought him to preach this sermon, but he primarily focuses upon the outside circumstances that have torn the black community apart, not the actual events between the KOCO and the Black P Stone Nation street gang. For Jackson, the effects of racial segregation are all around and clearly definable, but the causes are not being addressed or understood. These causes are the ultimate reason why Burrell's church was burned down and why the black community must remain unified in the face of like pressure.

The Dry Bones sermon model also appears at a time of "urgent" and "overriding" social need, and amidst "divisive factionalism" within the African-American community, in Zora Neale Hurston's 1934 novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Within the novel, likely during the early 1920s, the deacons of Zion Hope Baptist Church in Sanford, Florida, attempt to oust their pastor, the Rev. John "Buddy" Pearson. The deacons orchestrate what is ultimately a showdown between Pearson and the Rev. Felton Cozy, who is brought in to challenge and possibly replace Pearson. Pearson is tipped off by one of his friends on the deacon board, who tells Pearson "'tuh strow fire dis mawnin'" or he might be replaced. Pearson's enemies on the board are jealous of his power and position (and his popularity with women), and this conflict between Pearson and the board has started at the behest of Pearson's jealous and vengeful second wife, Hattie, who approaches Deacon Harris about a potential take-down. Trying to win her affection, Harris resolves he will "cut down dat Jonah's gourd vine in a minute" (146). The anti-Pearson faction that arises after Harris' decision to undermine Pearson rightly accuses Pearson of adultery and is also suspicious of possible misappropriation of funds while Pearson moderated the Florida Baptist Convention. Despite Pearson's personal issues, most Zion Hope members, and some of the deacon board, still want to keep him since they believe (possibly correctly) that his preaching is irreplaceable and it is therefore worth tolerating his infidelities. On the day of the showdown, Pearson's friend warns

him that while “nobody kin preach lak you,” if the new preacher “kin surpass yuh, den dere’ll be some changes made” (157). Additionally, he is told that Harris will expose the incriminating evidence to the community if Cozy can out-preach him.

Undaunted, Pearson “preache[s] his far-famed, ‘Dry Bones’ sermon, and in the midst of it the congregation forg[ets] all else. The church [is] alive from the pulpit to the floor,” whereupon John brings “his hearers to such a frenzy that it never subsided until two Deacons seized the preacher by the arms and reverently set him down,” as “[o]thers rushed up into the pulpit to fan and wipe his face with their own kerchiefs” (158). Most of the congregation is convinced right then and there that Pearson should remain. A “Sister Harris gloated” and afterward says that “[d]at other got tuh go some if he specks tuh top dat.” “Can’t do it,” Brother Jeff avows, “[c]an’t be done.” Others still want to “[w]ait til you hear de tother one.” When Cozy’s time comes that evening he speaks about being “a race man” out to solve “the race problem.” Soon after he begins, however, one congregant complains that “Ah ain’t heard whut de [scriptural] tex’ wuz.” “Me neither,” another responds, though at “the close of the service, many came forward and shook Cozy’s hand and Harris glowed with triumph.” Harris then questions some parishioners about Cozy’s sermon and Sister Boger responds, “‘Sermon?’” and makes “an indecent sound with her lips,” saying “‘dat wan’t no sermon. Dat wuz uh lecture’” (159). “Dat’s all whut it wuz,” echoes Sister Watson, who “switche[s] on off.” As a result, Harris realizes “that he must find some other weapon to move the man who had taken his best side-girl from him.” Using his Dry Bones sermon to defuse the factionalism that threatened to disrupt his church, Pearson is able to remain as pastor and Moderator. As in the situation on Chicago’s South Side, internal divisions threaten the unity of the African-American community.

As with Jackson's use of the Dry Bones sermon, Pearson's use of the sermon, while possibly self-serving, also seeks to defuse a contentious moment within the black community. In Jackson's hands, the sermon is obviously political, yet the politics of Pearson's sermon have been overlooked. An exploration of the Dry Bones sermon model can, therefore, reveal part of Hurston's elusive political commentary on internal U.S. imperialism and on black nationalism within the novel. In fact, while the Dry Bones sermon emerges at a moment of personal crisis for John, the sermon doubles as a moment of social crisis as it also speaks to the outgoing migration of a substantial part of the black community as a result of World War I and the Great Migration, all to suggest that black nationalism infused with African-American cultural traditions can remedy the internal colonialism practiced in the United States better than the black nationalism rooted in Western and European cultural traditions exemplified by Cozy can. In fact, Hurston seems to make fun of Cozy's position. In her study of African-American folklore, legend, and spirituality, *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston mentions that one preacher, who is much like Cozy, harped on the race question. According to Hurston, most blacks "say of that type of preacher, '[w]hy he don't preach at all. He just lecture's.'" In this way, the word lecture sounds "like horse-stealing" (106-107) because it smacks of white modes of discourse—modes based in rational, Enlightenment-style thinking. Such a preacher in the folk community would "'sound like a white man preaching,'" but even though there "is great respect for the white man as law-giver, banker, builder, and the like [...] the folk Negro do not crave his religion at all" (107). In fact, any preacher like Cozy who imitates white or seemingly white traditions would "come in for spitting scorn" (107).²

Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Literature

Zora Neale Hurston has often been accused of avoiding racial politics in her work by her (often male) contemporaries and later critics alike. She herself lends credence to such a position in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, where she writes, “from what I heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject” (171). Instead, she says, “[m]y interest lies in what makes a man or woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color.” She further says that she wanted to write about people of all races and types but unfortunately “that was not what was expected of me.” These expectations likely arose from her association with Harlem Renaissance writers and thinkers like Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, or the influential W. E. B. Du Bois. To be sure, her work avoids the overtly political mantra of Du Bois when he says that “all art is propaganda” (“Criteria” [29]), but my supposition is that Hurston was actually invested in the racial politics of her day. She says that in *Jonah* she wanted to write about “[c]ircumstances and conditions” that have the “power to influence” people’s reactions (171). To this end, Hurston examines the political circumstances and stimuli in the novel relevant to the black community both in her own historical context and even beyond her time. Instead of the directly political art expected of her, however, she embeds the politics of the novel in allusion, especially biblical allusion, as in the highly political Dry Bones sermon.³

As a plot device, the Dry Bones sermon is just a showdown between two preachers for the pastorship of one Florida Baptist church. However, exploring each pastor’s sermon reveals how the showdown speaks to the social changes happening within the folk community in and around Eatonville. The two preachers’ styles dramatize these social changes and competing forms of black nationalism in that Pearson’s Dry Bones sermon represents the novel’s investment in the folk and African-American cultural traditions as a way of resisting internal

colonialism. Even though Cozy's non-biblically based sermon represents a form of black nationalism that also seeks to maintain a distinct black culture within the U.S., his form of nationalism is troubled because it seems to rest upon Western and European modes of discourse and systematic analysis in achieving those aims. For Hurston, a nationalism that draws from African-American cultural traditions is far more powerful than Cozy's type of uplift.

The Dry Bones sermon in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, then, occupies a role in both speaking to the politics within the novel and offering meaning to the African-American community beyond the setting of the novel. The sermon speaks a message of hope both to contemporary or current readers and to Pearson's parishioners. For instance, Hurston's use of the Dry Bones sermon actually addresses the poverty and exploitation that many blacks find themselves living within and fighting against regardless of the era since the sermon type is meant to have a multi-generational component. What critics miss in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, then, is that the "unifying" "ritual" of the Dry Bones sermon type, one that began in the 1860s, is relevant across centuries of black history in the U.S. The sermon type, which is based on the vision of the valley of Dry Bones in the Hebrew text of Ezekiel, stretches across the post-Emancipation period, a time when its themes of rebirth and renewal were relevant to the newly free African-American community (Miller 25). Additionally, the sermon's themes (and the themes within the Ezekiel text that the Dry Bones sermon takes as its basis) are relevant to the African-American community whether the sermon is delivered in 1860, 1920, 1970, or even today, since the themes of the sermon speak to the inward and outward pressures that have been a feature of life for many blacks throughout the history of the United States; the specific circumstances may change, but the core meaning of a Dry Bones sermon is the same whenever it is preached and its politics are crucial in resisting

outward cultural forces.

Ezekiel and the Valley of the Dry Bones

The Dry Bones sermon model draws its inspiration from Ezekiel 37, the “Valley of Dry Bones” chapter, as well as from the whole of Ezekiel—an illuminating scriptural source overlooked by critics who have explored how Jonah and Exodus inform Hurston’s novel.⁴ The prophetic text’s narrative arc begins with a message of judgment, first against Israel and Judah (who have fallen woefully short of God’s commandments), but then against other nations (who have threatened the chosen nation of Israel). In ways similar to the “urgent” and “overriding” needs that prompt contemporary Dry Bones sermons, these internal and external threats to the integrity of the chosen community of Israel are severe enough to prompt Ezekiel’s prophecy. Thus, as the first to preach over the dry bones of his people, Ezekiel serves subsequent preachers not just as a text but as a model. The final third of the book, including the “Valley of Dry Bones” section, focuses on Israel and Judah’s future rescue and redemption, ending with a vision of a rebuilt Jerusalem and temple. Preachers use these same motifs of internal and external judgment and the idea of future rescue and redemption in crafting their Dry Bones sermons. More specifically, though, in the “Valley of the Dry Bones” section in chapter 37 of Ezekiel, the eponymous prophet speaks to an Israel still under Babylonian captivity, as Ezekiel is carried in a vision by the “Spirit of the Lord” into a valley full of dry bones. In the text, Yahweh asks Ezekiel if he thinks the bones can be made alive again. Ezekiel answers that only Yahweh knows, and Ezekiel is told that he should prophesy over the dry bones so that the bones should hear the word of the Lord. Ezekiel is initially reluctant, but after he does, the bones begin taking bodily shape, but without a living spirit. Ezekiel is again commanded to prophesy, and the bodies take living

form, becoming a vast and mighty army. The text then says, “Son of man, these bones are all the house of Israel. Behold they say, ‘Our bones have become dried up, our hope is lost, we are clean cut off to ourselves’” (*King James Version* Ezekiel 37:11). To many crafters of Dry Bones sermons throughout U.S. history, the black community might have looked “dried up,” feeling its “hope is lost,” and feeling “clean cut off to [itself],” but its members also found hope in the idea of being reborn as a “vast and mighty army.” The newly emancipated black community of the 1860s and beyond might have looked similar to the Hebrews in captivity: a group of people taken from their homeland and forced to live and work in a hostile culture, feeling “cut off” from their ancestral roots without hope in a new place, needing something to form them as a people and a nation. In fact, Yahweh is typically associated with mountains, especially in His dealings with individuals (something Hurston clearly recognizes, especially in her *Moses, Man of the Mountain*). Moses communes with God on Mt. Sinai and the Ten Commandments are written in mountain stone. Moses, too, views the Promised Land from atop Mt. Pishgah. Later, Elijah hears God speak to him in the “still, small voice” while he is perched upon a mountainside. Abraham is called to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah, and Solomon is commanded to build the Temple on the same locale. In the New Testament, too, Jesus’ transfiguration takes place atop a mountain and Jesus’ ascension takes place on the Mt. of Olives. Metaphorically, then, God and spiritual truth and experiences, then, are delivered from on high. Conversely, Israel experiences its worst moments from the metaphorical and real enemies of the people of God when living low in river valleys near major civilizations, namely Egypt and the Nile and the Babylonians and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Rivers and valleys, then, are places where the Israelites are literally and figuratively brought low as a result of their failed covenant relationship.

With strong parallels to the African-Americans living in a post-reconstruction United

States, Ezekiel and the people of Israel are living in exile in Babylon during Ezekiel's prophetic ministry (he is a contemporary of Jeremiah, in fact) and need something to keep them together as a nation in the midst of a hostile culture. Born in the priestly tradition, Ezekiel was another major figure carried off to Babylon after the first invasion but before the ultimate destruction of the Jewish temple in the sixth-century BCE. Like Daniel and others, Ezekiel is among the best and brightest chosen to serve Babylon in administrative duties for the empire, but he also serves the exilic community in the process. The Ezekiel text stresses the need for unity, for a commitment to cultural and religious practices (including prophecy and prayer) in line with the Jewish traditions that are still valid to that community despite the destruction of the religious-political symbol of the Temple, and the loss of their capital, Jerusalem. As such, the Dry Bones sermon is nearly always political. Yet, the primary function of the sermon is to defuse violence and factionalism within the African-American community where the focus on rebirth and renewal is always applicable since the sermon speaks both to its contemporary moment and to the future. The connection to Ezekiel only deepens the sermon's meaning. In Ezekiel, the eponymous prophet speaks a message of hope and renewal to the Jewish community living in Babylon. The Ezekiel text, like the Dry Bones sermon it spawned, offers hope to a community surrounded by harsh circumstances.

While the vision of the dry bones is the seminal moment in the Dry Bones sermon type, the whole of Ezekiel is critical in understanding Israel's situation. The preceding instances articulate why the Jewish nation is relegated to a field of dry bones, and the following chapters provide the necessary steps after its reformation. Andre LaCocque argues that, "[a]s regards the Vision of the Dry Bones, it is therefore of utmost importance that we read the text, not only prospectively, from its beginning to its end, but also retrospectively" (144). Here LaCocque

recognizes the importance of the entire book, not just this crucial moment in the valley of the dry bones. The vision of the dry bones hinges both on the many chapters leading up to this moment and on the remaining chapters of prophecy about the destruction of the oppressive regimes of Gog and Magog, making the text a liberation narrative directed against empire.

In fact, Daniel Block writes that their vague, mysterious qualities “made Gog and his confederates perfect symbols of the archetypal enemy, rising against God and his people” (436). God’s anger is directed at Gog and Magog since they are taking advantage of a disrupted and un-unified Israel, threatening the Hebrews while they are weak. As such, Ezekiel 38-39 warns that God “will lure hostile nations [...] into his land in order to make a final end to them, thereby guaranteeing permanent safety for his people” (Lyons 176). Additionally, Ezekiel speaks of a “second Exodus,” the return to the Promised Land after the Babylonian captivity. LaCocque further notes, “[a]s the first exodus from Egypt was immediately followed by a period of wandering in the wilderness, so too must be the case for the second exodus. [...] The necessity of a second exodus is due to the failure of the first one. History is not repeating itself with only a change of scenery from Egypt to Babylon. Ezekiel does not share the concept of the ‘eternal return’ of time” (144). In Ezekiel, then, Israel’s historical circumstances are actually improving despite the loss of Jerusalem. The captivity is a necessary step in Israel’s eventual reformation, not merely a purposeless repetition of a previous event. This is not a never ending cycle, but an ongoing process towards national redemption and national formation.

However, the Ezekiel text paints a bleak picture of the Jewish nation living in exile. Part of their problem, part of the cause of their extreme suffering, is their lack of unity while living in the shadow of Babylon; their disunity has brought about their ruin even before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, and it continues in exile, where they will only be able to resist the

Babylonian cultural intrusion as a unified people. For instance, speaking before the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, God warns Ezekiel that “the land is full of bloody crimes” and “the city is full of violence.” (Ezekiel 7:23). Later, Ezekiel admonishes the people who have “taken gifts to shed blood,” have “taken usury and increase,” and have “greedily gained of thy neighbours by extortion” (22:12). However, Henry McKeating writes that “[n]owhere in the book of Ezekiel, in all the oracles against foreign nations, is there any oracle against Babylon. This seems remarkable,” McKeating speculates, “in view of all that Judah suffered at Babylonian hands over the period which the book of Ezekiel covers. It is not remarkable, however, if Ezekiel is prophesying in Babylonia, where such oracles, if they had come to public notice, would doubtless have involved the prophet in immediate and serious trouble” (121-122). Nevertheless, the Ezekiel text does condemn Israel for its involvement with Babylon, a relationship that transformed the nation for the worse: “And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoredom, and she was polluted with them” (Ezekiel 23:17).⁵ Moreover, the Ezekiel text promises that God will recall all of Israel from the nations so that the Hebrews can live purely, away from the cultural influences that have adulterated the people (Ezekiel 28: 25-26). Their unity should be a way of staving off imperialism, but God castigates them since their disunity is aiding their destruction by making them vulnerable to outside influence.

LaCocque maintains that the “death of the nation in Babylon is no mere chastisement; the exile is no eclipse, no parenthetical time, no transient night before morning comes, and still less the feigned decease of an initiative. The exile is no sleep; it is death, death without morrow” (146). There is no gray area in exile according to LaCocque. The Jewish people are a beaten, broken-down people in need of rebirth and an infusion of spirit before they can live again and

regain shape as a nation. Hurston's message to the black community living in the post-reconstruction United States is similar: their experience of economic exploitation and cultural oppression is not just a bad time, a momentary thing, but a potential destructive moment that requires a spiritual component to stave off assimilation and dispersion. As such, mere political agenda and race baiting will not help; only a spirit-infused living voice can reanimate the African-American community.

Ezekiel's final chapters speak of a metaphoric and apocalyptic conflict between the Jewish nation and other nations called Gog and Magog. After the Jewish victory, the Temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem, which is re-established as the preeminent center of Jewish life. The Ezekiel text and the Dry Bones sermon lack full impact without the content of Ezekiel's final chapters covering Israel's future rebirth and restoration. Theologian and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: "The book of Ezekiel is a demanding reflection upon the crisis of the loss and the prospect of newness in ancient Jerusalem" (*Introduction* 207). The book of Ezekiel, therefore, offers hope that what was once destroyed can be remade. In other words, LaCocque says of the Ezekiel text that "the recovery of life signifies reconciliation, renewal. The prophetic eschatology represented in Ezekiel 37 is about a new start" (161). The revived bones are something new, a new creation, forged from but different from the old. Ezekiel and the Dry Bones sermon type address these conflicts of loss and renewal in their treatment of time. As LaCocque observes, the "Vision of the Dry Bones is a most interesting phase in the doctrine of resurrection because it links the nation's past and future" (157). The vision hinges on the past and future, connecting the cause of the degradation to the past, but further emphasizing the reformation as a future event as well. The crucial final chapters, too, speak towards future events.

Additionally, the narrative of Ezekiel, like the folk preacher's power and, specifically, the

Dry Bones chapter, emphasizes the life-giving power of words. “The [Ezekiel] narrative is held together by the key term *ruah*,” which “can be translated ‘spirit,’ ‘breath,’ or ‘wind’ according to the context,” says Blenkinsopp; “it is the spirit activated through prophetic preaching which bonds the community together and gives it the will to live and accept its future” (173). Once again, the emphasis is placed on “spirit,” “breath,” or, in this case, “wind,” which all evoke voice, which is, of course, Pearson’s forte. It is only the prophet’s spirit, breath, and voice that cause the dry bones to reform. Time and time again, the Dry Bones sermon types refer to this phenomenon of voice, of speaking as the necessary element in reformation. In this way, words—and preachers—create the nation. The Dry Bones sermons constantly refer to Ezekiel’s charge to speak and to prophesy over the dry bones. The bones are not brought back as result of action, or belief, or outside circumstance, but by the speaking voice only. Ezekiel enlivens the Jewish community by speaking a “prophetic preaching” that bonds the community together in order for that community to “live and accept its future” (Blenkinsopp 173). The choice and responsibility to hear these words lies ultimately with the community, not with Ezekiel, or any prophet. The latter have fulfilled their role in providing a life-giving spiritual voice, but the community must act, must form in response to the hope given by the liberatory voice. Yet, in the earlier chapters of the book, Ezekiel’s knowledge of the coming destruction of Jerusalem leads him into complete silence for a time; he no longer speaks prophetically because the weight of the matter leaves him speechless, refusing to shape and guide the nation as a result of its stubbornness in refusing to change. Brueggemann explains of Ezekiel that “the extended text of judgment runs out in silence, but the silence itself is an unmistakable articulation of the depth of loss, alienation, and abandonment” (*Introduction* 196) that the prophet feels regarding Israel. This absence of speech speaks to the way the prophet feels for the people of Israel since Ezekiel knows they are

coming to destruction—it is out of this moment that Ezekiel also senses the newness that can come out of this tragedy. In fact, Ezekiel only begins to speak again once the city of Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed by the Babylonians; it is only once the Hebrews’ cultural anchor is gone that he begins offering hope to the exilic community through his forward looking prophecies in chapters 33-48 (*Introduction* 197).

Unity in exile also connects to the parallel text of Ezekiel since the Hebrews’ situation in relation to the Babylonians is similar to that of blacks living in America: their cultural unity is threatened by a hostile nation. In fact, biblical commentator Joseph Blenkinsopp points out that the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 is set “in the same [physical] location, the plain or valley near the exilic settlements” where the Jewish people live (170). In setting the vision of the Dry Bones in the same place as the Jewish settlements, the text emphasizes the disastrous impact of the exile—the loss of cultural cohesion has left the nation susceptible to any outside influence that wants to transform Hebrew culture to be more like the dominant culture. To this end, like Dry Bones sermon, and the Ezekiel text itself, blames the internal strife on the community’s outward conditions, and on oppression levied against the community..

The idea of the “watchman” is an important theme in Ezekiel. The watchman is appointed to warn the community of coming danger, to help that community resist external and internal trouble. The watchman’s role in either rural or military terms is that of a scout, surveying the land for the approach of enemies or threats to the livestock or crops. The watchman’s role in the context of Ezekiel is to warn the exilic Jewish community when physical and / or spiritual danger “is imminent,” says biblical scholar Jack Lundbom (102). In fact, Ezekiel is appointed watchman quite early in the Ezekiel narrative, highlighting the “imminent” danger threatening the Jewish community. “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel:

therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me,” declares the prophetic text (Ezekiel 3:17). He is charged with warning the people about danger to the community either from without or within and, especially, about the peril of falling away from the Word of God. Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry, then, is based on his appointment as watchman. In fact, the text goes out of its way to emphasize this appointment, as Ezekiel’s call as watchman is renewed throughout the narrative. His mandate justifies the words he speaks, first against the Jewish people and then against other, oppressive nations. The warning he sounds to the people of Israel is that in losing the Word they are in danger of conforming to outside cultures, and that they are acting unjustly within their own communities—for instance, Ezekiel warns that the leaders of Israel use “their power to shed blood” (22:6) and are “like wolves ravening the prey, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain” (22:27); the “people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully” (22:29).⁶ As such, they are becoming like the Babylonians and other surrounding nations, and, according to Ezekiel, unfit for a return to Jerusalem, a second Exodus, because of their unjust ways towards one another. They are in danger of losing their cultural identity and thus their integrity as a nation.

The warning Ezekiel sounds as watchman is one of urgent and overriding social need for communal survival in a hostile land. There is no doubt that physical, systematic violence causes the desiccation of the community, the dry bones in the valley, but the rebirth and reunion can only come through voice and spirit that results in personal transformations that in turn creates national transformation. In fact, prophecy and, more specifically, the Dry Bones sermon, arise from moments of injustice. James Cone shows that the “rise of Old Testament prophecy is due primarily to the lack of justice within that community. The prophets of Israel are prophets of

social justice, reminding people that Yahweh is the author of justice.” Indeed, one “consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh’s concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society. Yahweh, according to Hebrew prophecy, will not tolerate injustice against the poor; God will vindicate the poor” (2). Ezekiel’s central role as watchman, then, stems from the lack of justice practiced within the Jewish community.

The Dry Bones Sermon in the African-American Cultural Tradition

As such, unity in exile is the seminal theme in any Dry Bones sermon, with the preacherly voice serving as a substitute for a lost cultural anchor. In fact, this idea is part of what makes the sermon relevant when internal division threatens the black community. Similarly, Cone maintains that “Black theology is the theology of a community whose daily energies must be focused on physical survival in a hostile environment” (11). Thus, the Dry Bones sermon in the hands of a black folk preacher is another way *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is political. In fact, the sermon cannot be anything but political given its thematic meaning and the historical context of its creation and use. The Dry Bones sermon, one that Eric Sundquist calls “highly conventional in the sermonic literature” (86), originated just before Emancipation and continues in popularity today (Miller 25). Lawrence Levine, in his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, articulates this connection to the Hebrew Bible this way: “For the slaves, then, songs of God and the mythic heroes of their religion were not confined to a specific time or place, but were appropriate to almost every situation” (31). The Dry Bones sermon type is also not bound to a “specific time or place” even though it often carries a specific meaning when performed.

This freedom from time constraints “enabled pastors and their listeners to continue their identification with their slave forbearers and with the Hebrews who escaped Pharaoh and

wandered in the wilderness only to be re-enslaved in Babylon,” writes Keith Miller (27). Even in the discouragement of returning to slavery in Babylon, the sense of return articulated in Ezekiel allows consideration that if “God’s followers in the Bible overcame slavery in Egypt and Babylon, then his African American disciples would eventually achieve a glorious triumph as well” (Miller 27). The Dry Bones sermon became popular just before Emancipation and afterwards because of this message. For practitioners and hearers of the Dry Bones sermon, the prophetic message carries special impact in its biblical basis since the weight of divine authority trumps the ordinary and temporal politics that lack this authority. The “glorious triumph” is visualized as a future event in Ezekiel—something to strive for in the midst of suffering in the valley. Thus, even after Emancipation, the idea of a glorious future continued to find resonance since the message of the sermon was still relevant given the work needed in forming a black nation after slavery. Once Reconstruction was abandoned, too, the Dry Bones sermon type remained important as blacks lost significant voting rights, experienced an alarming rise in lynchings, and underwent economic struggles. Miller argues that in “identifying with the Hebrews in Egypt and with other Biblical heroes,” blacks often “*leapfrogged* geography and chronology,” and they “*telescoped history, replacing chronological time* with a form of *sacred time*” (20; emphasis added). The triumph of the Dry Bones sermon, then, is that it repeatedly finds resonance in the African-American community because of its emphasis on “sacred time,” rebirth and renewal. Ezekiel and other biblical heroes became the “immediate predecessors and contemporaries” of blacks “as [the latter] freely mingled their own experiences with those of Daniel, Ezekiel, Jonah, and Moses” (20). In this way, the Dry Bones sermon is a cultural form in which slaves and their descendants “could vividly project Old Testament figures into the present because their universe encompassed both heaven and earth and merged the biblical past with the

present” (20). In this way, composers of Dry Bones sermons draw their strength “by consulting Biblical models, freeing those models from any constraints imposed by their historical contexts, and entirely ignoring all barriers separating past and present events” (Miller 20-21).

For African-Americans, the heroes of the Hebrew Bible were not ancient, mythic personas, but real live messengers of hope and faith to the oppressed that shaped their sense of communal identity. Dwight Hopkins describes this connection to liberation across time in his study of slave religion and black theology, stating, “[i]n a word, God not only acts on behalf of and with society’s marginalized and presents a sacred being to be with those with suppressed voices, the Spirit of total liberation is also for the poor in an epistemology of liberation” (166). For Hopkins, it is only by and through spiritual means that blacks can truly know they are free from slavery—the spiritual power of liberation creates their certainty in knowing their freedom. In addition to the Dry Bones sermon type, the whole of Ezekiel is a popular source of inspiration within the black church in seeking this “epistemology of liberation.”⁷ The sermon is also used as a way of overcoming the metaphoric valley in which African-Americans live, where “valley” life has caused their degradation and internal conflict in the first place. Given the history of race relations in the U.S., the Dry Bones sermon is one that has often been used and commented upon throughout the years in the black community since they often feel themselves “living in the valley” (both the U.S. South and the U.S. at large).

Similarly, “to the Negro,” the Rev. C. L. Franklin writes, “when he embarked upon these shores, America [...] was a valley: a valley of slave huts, a valley of slavery and oppression, a valley of sorrow” (in Titon 81). Franklin points out how blacks quickly recognized and associated America with oppressive valleys, and, likely, the valley cultures of the oppressive Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian empires depicted in the Hebrew Bible. For African-

Americans, their lives in America are akin to the Hebrews' facing oppression in valley cultures when they, too, were slaves. Jeff Todd Titon says of the many crafters of Dry Bones sermons that for them, "Babylon was a desolate place. Babylon represented a valley to Israel, a valley of depravity, a valley of disfranchisement, a valley of hopelessness, a valley of dry bones, a valley of lifelessness' (81). Thus, the Dry Bones sermon message is clear: a beaten and broken people can be made to live again through the magic of speech infused with the spiritual power of national formation. From slavery to the nadir (the low point of black life in the U.S. according to Rayford Logan), then, black life in the U.S. is life lived "in the valley," a geography of oppression. In this regard, "the valley" is anywhere the downtrodden find themselves. For turn-of-the-century blacks, the valley simply is the U.S. since their living experience is similar to that of Israel's valley life near Egypt and the Nile or Babylon and the Tigris and Euphrates.

Additionally, in *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, James Gregory comments upon this tradition. Gregory points out how Franklin, acting as one of Detroit's civil rights leaders, used the Dry Bones sermon extensively in his ministry through the 1950s and 60s. Franklin's Dry Bones sermon called "for black Americans to work for their deliverance from Babylon" (202) even while still living in "Babylon."⁸ In fact, Jesse Jackson first heard the Dry Bones sermon type from Franklin who, according to Gregory, repeated the sermon at Jackson's own ordination in 1968. "I still try to preach the dry bones in the valley," says Jackson, which for him represents, "the despised, the damned, the disinherited, the disrespected" (Gregory 202). Out of these struggles of political and civil unrest, former President Barack Obama, too, mentions Ezekiel and the Dry Bones sermon as a personal favorite. In discussing his experience at Trinity United Church of Christ (not that far from the Woodlawn Mennonite Church), he mentions that he "imagined the stories of

ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones." For him, "Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears," and the black church "seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world" (294). The sermon then carries on a cyclical tradition where young and aspiring preachers hear the Dry Bones sermon from a mentor and then preach their own version which, in turn, influences younger preachers in their audiences to craft personal variations with the general form and function being the same but adapted for contemporary circumstances. Similarly, John learns to preach and is ordained by a preaching mentor. While it is not explicit in the novel, John may have learned the Dry Bones sermon from this mentor or, certainly, from another preacher. In fact, this is his "far famed" sermon, one which he clearly uses throughout his well-known preaching career.

Yet, the Dry Bones sermon is nothing without the unique impact of the black preacher—an office that carries political implications in the black community. In fact, Dolan Hubbard argues in *The Sermon and the African American Literary Tradition* that the "significance of the black preacher's voice [...] lies in his ability to become the wheel within the wheel [an allusion to Ezekiel that has come to mean hidden or unknown things that secretly influence a situation⁹] as he fills the space within the space and the sound within the sound in order to get inside the unsaid to make the unseen seen" (34). In this way, the folk preacher crafts, creates, and shapes interpretation of contemporary events, also influencing them in mysterious ways. In short, black preachers expose hidden influences that disrupt the black community so they can thus challenge those destructive influences. Hubbard maintains that "the black church does not come alive until the preacher calls it alive with the sounds that resonate within his voice." The preacher thereby

“structures the meaning of blackness” for his listeners (11). Much like the prophet Ezekiel calling the dry bones alive, the black folk preacher infuses his church with meaning and life, giving shape to his congregation’s experience where the church models the nation animated by Ezekiel’s preacherly voice. Simply put, the “black sermon is the heroic voice of black America” for Hubbard (25). Speaking of the lasting power and the historical significance of the folk preacher as pastor and civil rights leader, Holt points out that “the historical fact that the black preacher became the only leader permitted [by whites] in black society has consequences that persist in today’s society” (195). One of these “consequences” is that the role of the preacher has been imbued with the political—that black preachers cannot preach without considering racial politics in their sermons, however indirectly. In this way, the Dry Bones sermon on a personal or individual level can serve as a meditation on the preacher’s vocation: it attests to the power of preacherly, prophetic utterance to breathe life into the people, to help them live and cohere as a people, a nation.

Additionally, Ruthe T. Sheffey maintains that despite some negative images, “there is no denying the centrality of the black preacher as a unifying force, often as an agent of protest. Moreover, he has often been a force in the community which traditionally imparted hope” (212). Eugene Genovese writes further that “black preachers faced a problem analogous to that of the early Christian preachers: they had to speak a language defiant enough to hold the high-spirited among their flock but neither so inflammatory as to rouse them to battles they could not win nor so ominous as to rouse the ire of ruling powers” (266). Dry Bones sermons can occupy a similar position when they avoid too much emphasis on specific politics of their contemporary moment. Instead, they succeed best when they offer a general call to unity and cultural cohesion that might be non-specific enough not to draw attention, yet still powerful enough to impact listeners

in equipping their lives to deal with life's difficulties. Moreover, Hortense Spillers argues that a sermon "locates the primary instrument of moral and political change within the community. But at crucial times, the sermon not only catalyzes movement, but *embodies it, is movement*" (44). Hence, the sermon calls people to action to change their circumstance, which may mean actual movement out of or away from harmful places. This "movement" can mean a communal focus on a particular problem facing the community. For Spillers and others, the folk preacher's role is to bring spiritual truth to his congregation, which in turn acts out that truth in transformative ways—ways that could venture into the political. Spillers further points out that "African-American sermons offer a paradigmatic instance of reading as process, encounter, and potential transformation." In this way, she argues, "the ritual narrative in this way bears an element of infection; everyone is compelled towards the same story" (44, 57). Indeed, preachers become powerful vehicles for black nationalism to resist outside oppression in the same way Ezekiel rallies Jewish nationalism in the face not only of outward oppression from Babylon but also of the internal disunity and injustice created by Babylon.

The black preacher, then, must call the community to account over instances where they are becoming like Babylon to bring about the desired change within the people; they must be the voice of resistance against oppression. Brueggemann puts the idea this way: "The prophetic task in such a social world [a place that creates and maintains oppression through its cultural and economic ways] is to maintain a destabilizing presence, so that the system is not equated with reality, so that alternatives are thinkable, so that the absolute claims of the system can be criticized" and "the powerful forces of stabilization that are at work among the participants and benefactors of the social system" can be challenged (*Social Reading* 223). Like the Hebrew prophets, the folk preacher offers alternatives, criticizes the system, and works to counter the

forces working against the community. For instance, Rev. Rubin Lacy's 1967 Dry Bones sermon mentions George Wallace as an example of the injustice thrown against the black community. Lubin preached that, "George Wallace of Alabama" publicly announced that he "was canvassing for white / supremacy." He further argues that "God is displeased at that," but does not dwell on the specifically political; he only briefly mentions it in a larger discussion of segregation in general. Lubin quickly returns to biblical examples against segregation, but does not return to Wallace in that condemnation (Rosenberg 273, 274). The point, here, is not direct political action against George Wallace specially, but against injustice, especially injustice done in God's name in general.

In fact, a Dry Bones sermon can fail if it is too temporally political. Bruce Rosenberg writes of one of the sample sermons listed in *Can These Bones Live?* that the aforementioned Rev. Rubin Lacy was "slow in getting started" because, like Cozy, he "spent a lot of his time on politics, local and international" (270). Lacy's sermon found its mark only after he discussed Ezekiel and the vision of the dry bones. Rosenberg further points out that most of Lacy's opening remarks "appear to have been lost on the congregation" since most listeners were not familiar with Lacy's specific discussion points on Israel's Six-Day War, nor a George Wallace political commercial that aired the night before the sermon (270). Forcing the political into the sermon did not work for Lacy. The thematic message in a Dry Bones sermon is what is transferrable across history, not direct political commentary. The congregants themselves take the message to heart and apply it to their contemporary experience, whatever that might be.

The preacher-prophet's message, then, must be subtle. The folk preacher must work destabilization and resistance into his message in covert, not always recognizable ways. This destabilization "may not be overt political action" Brueggemann writes, since, "[o]n occasion,

the prophets did speak directly about political issues,” but usually “the prophets issue a gesture or word that intends to play on the imagination of the community” (*Social Reading* 224).

Speaking on the power of the black church to transform, Rev. Calvin Marshall highlights this difference between subtle and overt political measures. He says, “[l]ong before there was a college degree in the race, there were great black preachers.” When oppressive forces “systematically killed your language, killed your culture,” Christianity “freed” blacks because blacks “understood things about” Christianity and made it “work in ways for them” that “it never worked for” the dominant cultural forces in the U.S. (in Holt 189). For Martin, black Christianity is the mainstay against cultural and political oppression, not necessarily political action; there is value in Christianity in maintaining black culture in the face of oppression that goes beyond generational lines and is, therefore, worth keeping. Within *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston seems to hold a similar position. Calling the African-American folk preachers the “only real Negro poets in America,” who “bring barbaric splendor of word and song into the very camp of the mockers” (in Boyd 259), Hurston highlighted the importance of the participatory element from the congregation as essential to the black church’s community—a participatory element that can be political if an individual makes a choice to act differently in “Babylon” after hearing a sermon, for instance. In celebrating the communal aspects of the black church, she writes how the people all add their voices to a song or a sermon, stating that “[e]very man [is] trying to express himself through song. Every man for himself. Hence the harmony and disharmony, the shifting keys and broken time that make up the spiritual.” In this way, “the religious service is a conscious art expression [sic]. The artist is consciously creating—carefully choosing every syllable and every breath” where each person’s contribution adds to the impact of the service overall (*Sanctified Church* 81). Likewise, Brueggemann says of the prophet’s role in shaping

community participation that the “prophets intend that the [oppressed] participants in the [oppressor’s] dominant system should hear enough to transform the system,” but their “characteristic experience is that assault on imagination drives system people only deeper into their closed imagination. The helplessness of the prophets is that they cannot penetrate this dominant imagination when it is finally hardened” (*Social Reading* 225) in the hearts and minds of the oppressed. The problem here is the hearers. To those Brueggemann describes as “hardened,” the prophets’ or the preachers’ message is unintelligible, a lost message since the system of oppression has already corrupted them. Like a prophet, the folk preacher must use his imagination in combating this oppression and hardening of hearts and minds in his congregation—he must reanimate imaginations, minds as well as bones. In fact, in one example of a Dry Bones sermon, Gerald David points out how the preacher “balances biblical reference against topographic fact relevant to the region in which the congregation is located. The whole sermon, indeed the church service, is pushed toward one goal, liberation in the secular environment” (63) to achieve a breakthrough in the congregation. This Dry Bones sermon is successful precisely because it speaks to both the spiritual and the contemporary and includes “relevant” material in light of where “the congregation is located,” offering hope for future redemption in the face of difficult and unjust circumstances and a chance to break through them.

The Dry Bones Sermon in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*

In Hurston’s novel, the immediate circumstances for John and his congregation are located in the transformation of black life as a result of World War I and the Great Migration. While a vanguard of immigration existed prior to 1916 as “indebtedness and the growing need for cash income prompted some family members to abandon full-time agriculture and to engage

in seasonal migration” (Arnesen 4), by the spring of 1916 African-Americans began leaving the South in mass numbers. They left the South for a variety of reasons: racism, disenfranchisement, poor economic conditions of subsistence farming, increased mob violence, and the economic fluctuations of the cotton market that resulted from heavy flooding in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama in 1916 all provided ample motivation for blacks to leave the South. This flooding was followed closely by a boll weevil infestation that further destroyed the cotton crop of 1916. For African-Americans, these forces seemed like biblical plagues of old, a signal of changing times. In fact, historian Milton Sernett writes that the flooding and boll weevil infestation were seen as “harbingers of worse to come,” leading to rumors that “God was punishing the white South and liberating the oppressed” and that a “great calamity was soon to befall the South” (64). As a result, preachers warned their congregations not to resist these events since they were divinely ordained (64). Many took these disasters as a sign to leave for the North. Additionally, with World War I offering increased economic opportunities for blacks many sought a new life in the North’s industrial cities during and after the war, spurred on by dreams of a new Israel in North. In fact, by 1917, “the term ‘exodus’ was widely used to describe the migration, replete with its biblical imagery of the enslaved Israelites’ triumphal flight from slavery and persecution in Egypt to eventual refuge in the promised land of Canaan” (Arnesen 2). Even though the North would not quite be the land of promise, the new Canaan spoken of, many blacks did find increased wages, more social and political freedom, and, despite the racism in the North, safety from the extra-legal violence of the South. Throughout 1916-1918 and again in the early 1920s, many rural blacks participated in the mass exodus out the South. In all, an estimated 450,000 to 500,000 African Americans between 1915 and 1918 and another 700,000 in the 1920s left the rural South for the industrial North, California, and to a lesser extent, the rural West (Arnesen 1).

The Great Migration, then, transformed life for blacks in the United States.

Not all saw these changes as beneficial. Preachers and other leaders warned that black experience in the North would likely not be the stuff of legend attributed to it and often argued that the largely rural and Southern blacks had a special attachment to the soil and the Southern climate that should not be forsaken. In fact, Booker T. Washington warned in 1912 that it is in “the rural districts [that] the Negro [...] is at his best in body, mind, and soul. In the city,” however, “he is usually at his worst” (in Sernett 20). He would say later that “when the Bible says, ‘The earth is full of Thy riches,’ it means that the earth is full of corn, potatoes, peas, cotton, chickens and cows, and that these riches should be gotten out by the hand of man and turned into beautiful church buildings and a righteous, useful living” (33). These leaders also worried about what the South would look like after the intense migration. They worried what would happen to their churches and communities after suffering an unprecedented loss of members. These fears proved justified. While the rural Southern black community technically survived the Great Migration, individual churches and denominational organizations such as the AME and the CME suffered drastic reductions in membership, leadership, and the ability to organize as a result. Sernett writes that many Southern “clergy with scattered or weakened congregations no longer had regular salaries” and many denominational groups now found themselves in “financial crisis” (111). The cultural and financial crisis left in the wake of the Great Migration was so acute that by the end of the 1920s, it was clear that “the rural black church in the South was in a state of institutional anomie” (225). Thus the need for John’s Dry Bones sermon.

Jonah’s Gourd Vine seems to echo the warning of many black leaders regarding the Great Migration—especially in the context of the transformation of the black church. In fact,

Pearson's church (and John himself) seems to be left in this state of "anomie" as a result of the migration. In the novel, a wartime spirit of U.S. national and cultural unity that seems to come from outside the community actually threatens the black community with cultural assimilation into the national culture. The narrative states that a "fresh rumor spread over the nation. It said war. It talked of blood and glory—of travel, of North, of Oceans and transports, of white men and black" (147). As a result, "black man's feet learned roads. Some said good bye cheerfully...others fearfully, with terrors of unknown dangers in their mouths...others in their eagerness for distance said nothing. The daybreak found them gone. The wind said North. Trains said North. The tides and tongues said North, and men moved like the great herds before the glaciers" (147-148). Here, many of the younger generation cannot resist the chance to escape the oppressive, white supremacist social conditions of the South, even if reluctantly. The "great herds" are being driven by the inexorable circumstance of the "glaciers" whether they want to move or not. While being called out of the South would likely be beneficial to the black community, the warning is that the living in the North carries danger too. Indeed, the call of a U.S. national culture could threaten distinctive black culture. This narrative, too, is born not of African-American culture (nor from John's generational ethos), but from "Babylon." The call here is to serve "Babylon" and, thus, become more like its culture. In the midst of these rapid changes, John muses, "we preachers is in uh tight fix. Us don't know whether tuh g'wan Nawth wid de biggest part of our churches or stay home wid de rest" (150). John does stay home with the rest, but at least wrestles with the decision of shepherding his congregation (the bigger part) in a new location. John empathetically recognizes that this rift is caused by the legal, political, and economic realities of life in the South. He also realizes how the drive to create a more unified country through war actually leaves the rural black community worse off since the war

promotes U.S. nationalism, not black nationalism. The rhetoric Hurston offers about World War I pushes its hearers towards war. All the nation is subsumed in this drive towards war when “[c]onscription, uniforms, bands, strutting drum-majors, and the mudsills of the earth arose and skipped like the mountains of Jerusalem on The Day” (148). Eventually, this cultural transformation leads people to become “money mad,” and with the “pinch of war gone, people must spend” (149). Thus, many black southerners sought a new life in the industrial North, leaving a vacuum in their wake and, in the novel, leading to a crisis at Zion Hope and other churches. The problem, then, with this seemingly beneficial narrative of a more unified country both racially and geographically, is that the national U.S. culture is acting like Babylon in seeking to absorb an exilic community, thus diminishing the distinctly black culture contained within, subtlety (or not so subtlety) changing the way the black community thinks, acts, and believes. As such, it is ultimately the North and the drive towards U.S. nationalism that threatens to hold the black community captive and assimilate it as evinced in Jackson’s Chicago Dry Bones sermon in 1970. While the South is oppressive in its treatment of blacks, Southern culture seems to not be interested in assimilating blacks. Hurston seems to warn that while the allure of the North in escaping Southern oppression is attractive, there is a danger the black community will become trapped and, thus, subsumed.

By placing the material on World War I and the Great Migration immediately before John’s Dry Bones sermon, then, Hurston invites us to understand John’s sermon not just in the immediate, internal context of John’s personal crisis or even of the trials of the black folk community of central Florida, but in the larger context of the southern social order that so many of John’s parishioners are leaving and the northern / U.S. social order they are entering. (The Dry Bones sermon is thus applicable in the South and in the North—hence, Hurston location of the

sermon in the rural South and Jackson's in the urban North.) This context points to the issue of the African-American community's relationship to the U.S., as that surrounding society by turn takes the form of southern Jim Crow oppression or northern opportunity. In this way, the southern black community faces external pressure not only from white southerners and the post-Reconstruction problems but from Northern culture, too, if they decide to leave the South. Thus, the Dry Bones sermon presents a similar relationship between Israel and Babylon, portraying African-Americans as an uprooted nation contending with its imperial oppressors. The North is acting as an agent of cultural change to make blacks more like the national culture with the South an aggressive, violent culture bent on direct oppression and hostility. The southern black communities must instead cohere to their values and way of life in the face of differing cultures vying to change them. The analogy allows Hurston (and John) to address and explore the relationship between the black nation and U.S. empire, including the internal "imperialism" or "colonialism" associated with white supremacy in which an African-American culturally infused black nationalism can become a way of resisting these external pressures. The "call of the North" sought the South's "muscle hands." Since the "wheels and marts were hungry," the "great industries sent out recruiting agents throughout the South to provide transportation to the willing but poor." (149). What seems like economic opportunity is also a way of feeding the industrial machine of the North. If the South had been a land of opportunity in the first place, then blacks would not need to seek this work. Instead, the lack of opportunity in the South leads many African-Americans to leave, thus deepening the gulf in the South. This is also why the Dry Bones sermon is relevant to rural and urban blacks alike. The outside pressures, be they southern or northern, rural or urban, make no difference. A potentially potent antidote is for the community to remain intact and unified, precisely the main thesis of the Dry Bones sermon.

Even if the congregation does not adhere to its warnings (which seems to be the case for Zion Hope), the sermon's message is still the needed answer in cohering as a people and nation. In this way, John is enacting his "prophetic task" that maintains a "destabilizing presence" (*Social Reading* 223) John is reminding his congregants that these systems of oppression do not have to be reality; if the people adhere to one another and their way of life, they can resist.

One problem with Pearson's Dry Bones sermon, however, is that the sermonic text is not rendered in the novel. Even though Hurston offers text from other sermons Pearson preaches, she does not do so here. Instead, only the emotional impact upon the congregation and Pearson is offered, as evinced by the congregants' and John's emotional responses to his sermon. Cozy's sermon, however, is, in part, transcribed. One possible explanation is that, according to Dolan Hubbard in *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*, the folk aspect of preaching loses something when rendered in textual form—the sermon (and the song) might lose their folk value and become Westernized, an object of study and analysis, when produced in textual form. Hurston's interest in the performance aspects of folk songs and spirituals, then, may have led her to omit the sermon's text. Nevertheless, Jay Watson calls the missing text a "curious omission" and speculates that "Hurston wanted to avoid stealing any thunder from Pearson's performances to come in the pulpit, for the narrative is far more preoccupied with the music that accompanies the service" (105). Likewise, Eric Sundquist argues, that, "[a]s in her theory of the spirituals, Hurston suggested that what went unrecorded was perhaps even more significant" (54).

Nevertheless, I think it is no accident that Hurston chooses not to include the text here, given that she devotes several pages of text to Pearson's farewell sermon—a sermon that is taken almost word for word from a sermon Hurston heard on her anthropological endeavors, preached

by C. C. Lovelace in 1923—as well as to other sermons Pearson preaches. If Hurston did want to “avoid stealing any thunder” from Pearson’s folk-style preaching, intentionally leaving it out of the text in juxtaposition against that of Cozy, his rival, she might have wanted to show the impact of the folk preacher beyond his words, and what those words and power can accomplish, in order to emphasize the contrast between Pearson and Cozy. In fact, Cozy’s unsuccessful sermon alternately sheds light on what John does well and why / how his choice of sermon speaks more directly to his congregants than Cozy’s race-lecture. In their detailed study of the black American church, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya contend that the “highlight of the service was to worship and glorify God by achieving the experience of mass catharsis; a purifying explosion of emotions that eclipses the harshness of reality for a season and leaves both the preacher and the congregation drained in a moment of spiritual ecstasy” (6). Out of this draining and catharsis, the community is thus better able to combat external pressure and oppression. Cozy’s brand of nationalism comes up short in this manner. “Failure to achieve the experience,” Lincoln and Mamiya continue, “often resulted in polite compliments of ‘good talk’ or ‘good lecture,’ and not the ultimate ‘you *preached* today!’ being offered to the preacher” (6). This is exactly what happens to Cozy in his sermon. His message of race pride offers only specious reasoning and mere information, nothing to move the people beyond their circumstance the way Pearson can with his spiritually infused folk preaching. John’s preaching thus proves the more effective nationalist discourse. Recalling Hubbard’s idea that the church does not “come alive until the preacher calls it alive” to “structure the meaning of blackness” (11), Pearson’s spiritually infused voice is what brings his hearers to a frenzy—his voice infused with words from the Bible’s power to liberate is what offers hope to the black community, which the congregation clearly sees is lacking in Cozy, as evidenced by their reaction to John’s sermon and

lack of a powerful reaction to Cozy's sermon. Additionally, Cozy seems to only offer positive uplift and cannot offer a critique of society, or, when necessary, challenge the community in ways John's exhortations can as, for instance, in his final sermon. Instead, John offers a black nationalism grounded in the specific cultural practices of the African-American preacher, whereas Cozy's nationalism is grounded in Western European cultural traditions.

I would also suggest that since the Dry Bones sermon is so ritual and "highly conventional," Hurston did not need to render the text since her black readers would have known exactly what the sermon covered, signaled, and meant. In a way, the words themselves do not matter. Just as Jesse Jackson's "mere mentioning" of the Dry Bones sermon brought maximum attendance from a group who automatically knew the sermon signaled an urgent and overriding social issue in the community, so too does Hurston issue an urgent and overriding social signal in the historical moment of the novel. At the mere mention of the Dry Bones sermon, her black readers would likely have immediate understanding of what it means in that moment of the novel where other readers might have missed its importance, hiding the politics of the sermon in plain sight. Furthermore, there is only so much variation that can happen in this "highly conventional" sermon form; a sermon type given in one era is likely similar in form and structure as that structure has generally stayed the same and gets passed down from generation to generation. The specific circumstances may change—and those circumstances are important in their contemporary moment—but what matters in Dry Bones is the overall message of unity and achieved mass catharsis in times of trouble, not necessarily the specific words. Additionally, it is the power of the preacher's voice and performance that gives the words (and the congregation) life—something Cozy is not able to accomplish whereas John clearly can. Even though the sermonic text is not offered in the novel, my contention is that Pearson's use of the Dry Bones

sermon, if only obliquely, is political in its message. The “same story” in Pearson’s use of Ezekiel is one of redemption—a redemption fostered through the spiritually infused words of the folk preacher. Pearson is “bringing truth” to the community, but the community is the “primary instrument” that can bring about “moral and political change” through its own actions. The response would then be for the African-American community not to turn on each other but to act justly towards one another, and to use their cultural heritage to resist internal colonialism. The fact that John is able to keep his position in the church could be read as a sign of the sermon’s success: the community forgives John’s failings as a way of maintaining strong cohesion in the face of outside pressure and is now better able to resist those circumstances by staying together.

However, the church does eventually succumb to pressure and John decides to leave his pastorate for an attempt at better life in other parts of Florida. In fact, like John’s Dry Bones sermon, his final sermon (before stepping down at Zion Hope) seeks to illustrate the need for unity. He constantly references the wounds of Jesus as well as Jesus’ betrayal from within his group. “Our theme this morning is the wounds of Jesus,” says Pearson as he begins his farewell sermon. Speaking further on the wounds of Jesus, Pearson quotes Zachariah 13:6: “Those are they with which I was wounded in the house of my friends,” and Pearson then comments further how, “a man usually gets wounded in the midst of his enemies, but this man was wounded, says in the text, in the house of His friends” (175). By comparing himself with Christ, Pearson finds himself similarly wounded and betrayed by his own people and friends. The needs, pressures, and politics of the black folk community become too much for him. Even though Pearson evades his enemies during his Dry Bones sermon, he eventually succumbs to the internal pressures of life in the valley and becomes sick and tired of having to fight for his church against internal pressure since he feels betrayed and wounded by the same people he felt called to shepherd.

Indeed, Pearson draws on his “famed” Dry Bones sermon to save his own skin, to maintain his position against his enemies within the church, which he successfully does. Even so, one of the primary tensions of the novel hangs on this showdown between Pearson and Cozy in a figurative way. Pearson’s enemies within Zion Hope Baptist Church are not really upset at his adultery but see it as a chance to oust him for their own benefit—the tensions that arise from “valley” living rear their ugly head as the community is beginning to tear itself apart in ways similar to the Hebrews acting unjustly towards one another before their exile into Babylon. Pearson’s enemies want the power and prestige Pearson enjoys not only locally but within the community of blacks in central Florida. Even though Pearson preaches his sermon with some degree of selfish motivation, then, he is trying to save himself from enemies within Zion Hope who are weakening the church community in their drive to seek power for themselves. What is really to blame here, however, is the external circumstances of “valley life”—especially external racial oppression and the economic situation in and around Eatonville—are creating the internal conflicts that are tearing the Zion Hope community apart. Harris’ attempts to oust John, and John’s infidelities and discrepancies, are, in fact, symptomatic of valley life. If blacks were not living in the valley, then these types of conflicts would be fewer and far between. Thus, while her critics accuse her of avoiding obvious propaganda, Hurston uses this important moment in the novel to display her political message of black nationalism as a means of resisting internal imperialism and external pressures harming the black community.

Despite his personal motives, the communal need for John’s Dry Bones sermon ultimately stems from the metaphorical and physical dangers of “life in the valley.” Like Israel’s valley experience in Babylon, the Eatonville-Sanford community similarly lives in the valley in as much as Hurston suggests that to be black in U.S. at this time is thus to occupy the valley

where threats to the community are quite close. Besides the metaphorical connections, there is a very real physical danger from “life in the valley.” Additionally, even though Eatonville does enjoy a wide variety of autonomy and shows a successful example of independent black leadership, the community was, in the novel’s time, largely a service community to the rich white communities nearby. While this is not clearly explained in the novel, historically most Eatonville inhabitants earned their living from jobs such as maids, domestics, or in various service industry jobs. For example, Tiffany Patterson writes of the historical Eatonville that “[m]ost men were employed as day or farm laborers in the surrounding citrus groves. Women worked as domestics and washwomen, probably for the whites who lived in neighboring Winter Park and Maitland” (76). Even though Eatonville avoided racially motivated attacks, likeminded communities that wanted to distance themselves from racial violence “often invited the very violence they hope[d] to avoid” (65) by living in separate communities. In this way, life in Eatonville / Sanford was life in the valley. At any moment residents could be among the “despised, the damned, the disinherited, the disrespected” that Jackson places at the center of the Dry Bones sermon. In fact, this life in the valley points to the historical phenomenon that Rayford Logan and other black historians would term the “nadir.” Coinciding with the events depicted in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, this term evokes a descent into new “lows” of racial injustice and racial oppression, a kind of neo-slavery that is somehow even “lower” than slavery after the brief respite of the Reconstruction years. For example, “*Jonah’s Gourd Vine* describes a new beginning,” writes Wiebke Omnus, “as the American South emerges from racial slavery and introduces characters who remain enslaved mentally, emotionally, spiritually. This shows clearly in the violence they do to each other, and the futility of their struggles and attempts to change” (221). In fact, legalized, institutional Jim Crow; spectacle lynching; convict leasing; debt

peonage—these historical realities cast an ironic light on period discourse stressing ascent such as Booker T. Washington’s memoir *Up from Slavery* (published in 1901, the same year that Logan deemed as the very worst in African-American history).

Likewise, Pearson’s physical trajectory in *Jonah* is also one of downward movement into the low point of Eatonville-Sanford. John is continually moving further and further South in ways that move him deeper into the spiritual valley that the South represents to African-Americans; he is moving further and further into danger and vulnerability as he moves more into valley culture like those of the Egyptians and Babylonians and away from a mountain experience represented in Yahweh. John moves from the familiar upland setting of his Alabama home to the alien landscape of Florida in ways similar to the Jews being transported away from their familiar surroundings in Jerusalem to the unfamiliar, vulnerable landscape down by the Babylonian riverside. This is not to say John had a mountain-top experience while living in Alabama, but his life there was where he met Lucy and he did have a strong community and support network. Nevertheless, in seeking better economic opportunity Pearson moves from his step-father’s sharecropping land in Alabama to “across the creek” where he meets Lucy, and his exploits soon have him literally and figuratively moving in a southward trajectory until he reaches the lowest state in the continental U.S., Florida—an area that is not only threatened by social and cultural oppression but by an environmentally vulnerable landscape as well. In this way, John is moving from the Alabama piedmont into the coastal lowland plains of Florida. Therefore, not only is John moving “down” from Alabama to Florida, it can be seen as descent into the valley where “south” figures as “down,” and the Deep South as a valley.

For Hurston in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, however, the aftermath of the Great Migration and the already low socio economic status of most Sanford / Eatonville residents sends them to a low

point in valley life. This mass exodus leaves “[h]ouses empty eve’ywhere. Not half ‘nough people tuh work de farms—crops rotting in de ground” (150). As a result, Zion Hope loses two hundred members in three months, forcing the church leaders to raise dues, which puts even more economic strain on the remaining members. The economic peril is so fraught that Hurston compares it with a scriptural plague: “Whereas in Egypt the coming of the locust made desolation, in the farming South the departure of the Negro laid waste the agricultural industry—crops rotted, houses careened crazily in their utter desertion, and the grass grew up in the streets. On to the North! The land of promise” (151). In fact, only a short interlude chapter stands between this expression of desolation and desertion and the strife within Zion Hope Church, where the “cry of ‘Goin’ Nawth’ hung over the land like a wail over Egypt at the death of the first-born” (151).¹⁰ The next chapter after the short interlude contains the Dry Bones sermon. My point here is that soon on the heels of Hurston’s critical analysis of the prospects of going North is precisely when Pearson is faced with the crisis of having to save his pastorship; this is the exact moment when people left behind are “laid waste” by the economic injustice of post-Reconstruction Jim Crow. Once again, life in the valley leads to internal crisis because a lack of justice toward the community creates economic peril, hence the need for the Dry Bones sermon.

In using the Dry Bones sermon at precisely this moment, then, John is preaching about what preachers do—he is reminding his congregation of just how important an effective preacher is. And he’s reminding them not just with his inspired performance but with his choice of a sermon that takes as its subject precisely this sort of inspiring power, the power to reanimate the dry bones with the voice alone. He is able to reach them in their struggles since his sermon comes precisely at their lowest point. In this way, John is teaching his members to read the times, to recognize their circumstances, and he offers hope to his congregants in the midst of these

troubles. Given the impact of the sermon, John clearly resonates with them at this critical moment in the novel.

Throughout her career, Hurston's interest in the ancient Israelites parallels her interest in the black community. Her "glorious obsession with [the King Herod] story," for instance, "was an offshoot of her burning desire to write the history of the long struggle of the Jewish people," whose "consistent refusal to give up their own laws, language, and beliefs and assimilate into the predominant culture they lived among frequently made them objects of derision and suspicion" (Moynlan 91). Hurston explores Jewish history not just for its liberation theology, but for examples of the actual practice of the Jewish people in resisting assimilation to an oppressor culture. Like Ezekiel, who stresses liberation, national survival, and restoration, Hurston "understood cultural survival as a condition of liberation and cultural affirmation as an essential step in decolonizing the Black mind." She further "saw that within African-American culture lay the alternative images, self-definitions, and strategies necessary to resist Anglo-American cultural domination and reclaim Black life," according to Plant (4). Thus, in attempting to "reclaim Black life," the Dry Bones sermon offers a glimpse into why Hurston sometimes seemed to advocate a "separate but equal" stance: it is a means of national cohesion and survival in the face of external cultural pressure.

In offering a coded politics embedded in liberation theology in *Jonah*, Hurston advocates a black politics divergent from traditionally conceived Anglo-American political thought as Hurston seems to reject Cozy's Western-based nationalism. For instance, Hemenway suggests that Hurston's fiction "exhibited the knowledge that the black masses had triumphed over their racist environment, not by becoming white and emulating bourgeois values," nor by "engaging in a sophisticated program of political propaganda [as Cozy seems to do], but by turning inward

to create the blues, the folktale, the spiritual, the hyperbolic lie, the ironic joke.” These “forms of expression revealed a uniqueness of race spirit because they were a code of communication—interracial propaganda—that would protect the race from psychological encroachments of racism and the physiological oppression of society” (51). Thus, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* adds the sermon to Hemenway’s list of cultural resources. Pearson often “turns inward” in shaping his sermons, deriving them from personal experience—personal experience that often mirrors situations in American black life writ large, especially his final sermon, which is drawn from his experiences with internal divisions breaking the black community apart within Zion Hope.¹¹

In rejecting and condemning internal discord, the Dry Bones sermon, in its scriptural context, is a call for national unity (a unity predicated on the distinctive identity of the Hebrews as a covenant people, God’s chosen) among a people placed under the imperial yoke and displaced from their homeland. In other words, the Dry Bones sermon proposes cultural nationalism as an anti-imperial strategy: it locates in national identity and unity a source of strength, survival, resistance, and coherence for a people suffering under an imperial oppressor, condemning internal strife and disunity in the process. Blacks are better equipped to resist the internal colonialism practiced in the U.S. if they remain true to their cultural heritage and resources. Beyond its relevance for John Pearson specifically, this is the relevance of his particular sermon type for black America: through the figure of the prophetic speaker, it posits black expressive culture (the blues, the folktale, the spiritual, and the sermon, etc.) as the basis of black nationalism, and black nationalism as a resource for resisting the forms of internal oppression practiced in and by the U.S. during John’s and Hurston’s eras. The black preacher, through his words, is the one who can craft the people into a nation and create nationalistic content, something mere racial performance (and, maybe, mere protest fiction) cannot do.

Endnotes

¹ For recent research on the subject, see Robert Sampson's *Great American City* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' article in *The Atlantic* where he argues that "[t]hroughout the 20th century—and perhaps even in the 21st—there was no more practiced advocate of housing segregation than the city of Chicago. Its mayors and aldermen razed neighborhoods and segregated public housing. Its businessmen lobbied for racial zoning. Its realtors block-busted whole neighborhoods, flipping them from black to white and then pocketing the profit. Its white citizens embraced racial covenants—in the 50s, no city had more covenants in place than Chicago." Thus, he writes, "[i]f you sought to advantage one group of Americans and disadvantage another, you could scarcely choose a more graceful method than housing discrimination. Housing determines access to transportation, green spaces, decent schools, decent food, decent jobs, and decent services. Housing affects your chances of being robbed and shot as well as your chances of being stopped and frisked. And housing discrimination is as quiet as it is deadly. It can be pursued through violence and terrorism, but it doesn't need it. Housing discrimination is hard to detect, hard to prove, and hard to prosecute. Even today most people believe that Chicago is the work of organic sorting, as opposed to segregationist social engineering. Housing segregation is the weapon that mortally injures, but does not bruise" ("This Town Needs a Better Class of Racists").

² Moreover, Hurston sees such racial commentary as a way to make a career, not as something a person is authentically interested in. She derogatorily says in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, that a "'Race Man' was somebody who always kept the glory and honor of his race before him. Must stand ever ready to defend the Negro race from all hurt, harm and danger," and if someone disagreed, or did not reciprocate the sentiment, "It was a mark of shame if somebody accused: 'Why, you are not a Race Man (or woman).'" She charges that "People made whole

careers of being ‘Race’ men and women. They were champions of the race” (179). Cozy’s failure seems to indicate Hurston’s preference for spiritual, political, and liberatory actions based upon African-American cultural traditions.

³ These charges of eschewing politics remain against Hurston in the late twentieth-century, too, as she has been accused of advocating an escapist folk aesthetic and refusing to interrogate contemporary black experience. For example, Hazel Carby is critical of Hurston’s portrayal of the folk, calling her representations “inappropriate” (173) and a “utopian reconstruction of the historical moment of her childhood in an attempt to stabilize and displace” her “contemporary moment” (174). Carby says in this in part since during the Great Migration many newly urban blacks saw the folk as dangerously backward. Leigh Anne Duck writes that these now Northern blacks saw their folk heritage as “a dangerous nostalgia for an experience inaccessible to modern subjects and, furthermore, inextricably linked to racist exploitation” (116). In order to seem more urbane to their black and white urban associates, many of these African-Americans wanted to distance themselves from their folk heritage. This “folk-time” can also be dangerous in promoting the “uncannily pleasurable experience of time, one that compensates so precisely for the alienating effects of modern individualism and urbanization that it might lure northern African-Americans into temporarily overlooking the more threatening aspects of southern life.” In this way, Hurston’s presentation of the folk can appear to be a dangerous, backward-looking trope that either ignores or is not “participating in national modernity” (119). Duck concludes, however, that “Hurston imagines a private, individualized form of folkloric preservation—one that, though perhaps ultimately conservative, constitutes a formal innovation in response to social change” (135). In this way, modernization is actually a dangerous force threatening black experience as it erodes important cultural traditions. Hurston’s preservation of the folk, however,

actively resists this potentially destructive social change by stressing cultural unity as a way of resisting cultural imperialism. For Carby, though, Hurston gestures too close to the “dangerous nostalgia” of folk-time. Yet, Carby focuses on *Their Eyes were Watching God*, and, to an extent, *Mules and Men*. Hurston’s portrayal of the folk in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, especially in its use of the Dry Bones sermon type, works against the idea of the folk as simply an escapist fantasy. My point here is that Hurston’s use of the Dry Bones sermon challenges the notion of a utopian, head-in-the-ground fantasy of escape from present times that Carby seemingly charges of Hurston.

⁴ See John Lowe’s *Jump at the Sun* (143) for commentary on Hurston and the Great Migration as Exodus. See Gary Ciuba and Wiebke Omnus for discussions on how the book of Jonah informs the novel.

⁵ Psalm 137 is worth noting here. While the Ezekiel text itself does not condemn Babylon, the Hebrews’ refusal to sing songs of their homeland at the request of their captors is another layer that indicates the strain put upon the Jewish community by the exile.

⁶ Hurston uses similar imagery in her depiction of the infighting occurring at Zion Hope. After Lucy’s death and John’s troubling lifestyle, members of Zion Hope turned on him. Hurston writes, “there were those who exalted in John’s ignominious fall from the Moderatorship after nine years tenure, and they milled about him like a wolf pack about a tired old bull—looking for a throat-hold.” However, since John still has exception skill as a preacher, “[t]he pack waited,” but this internal conflict left John “tired unto death of fighting off the struggle which must surely come” (141).

⁷ For instance, “Ezekiel saw the Wheel” is a spiritual drawn from the book, as is the popular song “Dem Bones”—the melody of which is widely attributed to poet and novelist and friend of Zora

Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson. Furthermore, the song often concludes Dry Bones sermons (the neck bone is connected to the shoulder bone / the shoulder bone is connected to the back bone / etc.).

⁸ The trope of the U.S. as Babylon is longstanding. Frederick Douglass used the trope in his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” suggesting the U.S., and especially those who invited him to speak near the Fourth of July, were acting in mocking “parallel” conduct to Babylon. He warns “that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation [Babylon] whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin” (in *Blassingame* 369). Douglass then likens black experience, and his speaking occupation, to that of the Jews in exile, asked by the Babylonians to sing songs of Zion. Citing Psalm 137 where the Jews sit by the rivers of Babylon to remember Zion, Douglass writes, “[f]ellow-citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day” (in *Blassingame* 369). In the 1950s, C. L. Franklin wonders in one Dry Bones sermon how for Ezekiel “it must have been discouraging sometime / for him to stand there / day and night / and preach in that valley / of dry bones, / to preach in that valley of helplessness / and in that valley / of lifelessness, / in that valley / of hopelessness” (in *Titon* 81).

⁹ Cambridge English Dictionary. Web.

¹⁰ Hurston writes in direct contrast to African-Americans who viewed the move as heavenly. In one poem, “Northboun,” the anonymous poet writes, “Since Norf is up, / An’ Souf is down, / An’ Hebben is up, / I’m upward boun” (in *Sernett* 63).

¹¹ In that final sermon, Pearson constantly references the wounds of Jesus as well as Jesus' betrayal from within his group. "Our theme this morning is the wounds of Jesus," says Pearson as he begins his farewell sermon. Pearson quotes *Zachariah 13:6*, "Those are they with which I was wounded in the house of my friends," then comments further how "a man usually gets wounded in the midst of his enemies, but this man was wounded, says in the text, in the house of His friends" (175). "It is not your enemies that harm you all the time," warns Pearson, but "[w]atch that close friend." Moreover, "every sin we commit is a wound to Jesus" (175). Comparing himself with Christ, Pearson finds himself similarly wounded and betrayed by his own people and friends. The needs, pressures, and politics of the black folk community become too much for him. Thus, his emphasis on the wounds from within reflects the internal conflict present in the black community caused by valley life, verifying that the crisis continues even in the wake of his *Dry Bones* sermon.

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- Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2003.

VI. VITA

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EDUCATION

- M.A. English, Eastern Illinois University 2006
Thesis: "Tracing Virag: the Impact of Jewish Migration in James Joyce's *Ulysses*"
- M.A. History, Eastern Illinois University 2001
Area: Early Modern England
- B.A. History, Eastern Illinois University 2000

PUBLICATIONS

Peer Reviewed Articles:

- "Mississippi on the Potomac: Sutpen's Hundred as Washington D.C." in *Faulkner and Hemingway*, ed. Chris Reiger (Cape Girardeau: Southeast Missouri State UP) [forthcoming; 18 pgs. ms].
- "'That Obliterating Strangeness': The Prairie Sublime in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* 57.3 (Winter-Spring 2015), 28-32.
- "'Gone Level Things': The Failure of Identity Politics in Tom Franklin's *Hell at the Breech*." *Under Review / In Preparation:*

Book Reviews:

- Review of *The Triple Package: What Really Determines Success*, by Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld. Forthcoming from *Journal of American Studies in Turkey*.
- Review of *Henry James* by Jeremy Tambling, in *Journal of American Studies in Turkey*. No. 40 (Summer 2014), 123-125.
- Review of *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces* by Andrew Keller Estes. *Journal of American Studies in Turkey*. No. 38 (Summer 2013), 114-116.
- Review of *Dixie Bohemia: A French Quarter Circle in the 1920s* by John Shelton Reed on H-Net Southern Studies (July 2013). Web.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Professional Employment

Eastern Illinois University

Instructor, Department of English, 2006-2011

Graduate Employment

Rhetoric and Composition

University of Mississippi

Writing 102: Beginning Composition (Instructor of Record) Spring 2016

Writing 101: Beginning Composition (Instructor of Record) Fall 2015

Writing 101: Beginning Composition (Instructor of Record) 2013-2014

Eastern Illinois University

English 1001: Beginning Composition (Graduate Instructor) Fall 2005

Tutor, Eastern Illinois University, Writing Center 2004-2005

Lakeland Community College

English 121: Beginning Composition (Graduate Instructor) Spring 2006

Literature

University of Mississippi

English 224: Survey of American Literature, 1865-2000 (TA) 2014-2015

English 224: Survey of American Literature, 1865-2000 (Instructor) Summer 2014

English 368: Twentieth-Century Southern Literature (Instructor) Summer 2013

English 222: Survey of World Literature, 1800-2000 (TA) Spring 2013

English 223: Survey of American Literature, 1600-1865 (TA) Fall 2012

English 223: Survey of American Literature, 1600-1865 (TA) Spring 2012

English 222: Survey of World Literature, 1800-2000 (TA) Fall 2011

AWARDS

Frances Bell McCool Fellowship, University of Mississippi, 2016-2017 -(dissertation fellowship awarded biannually to one student writing on Faulkner)

James Woodress Scholar Fellowship, University of Nebraska—Lincoln, 2016 -(research grant biannually awarded to one or two researchers exploring archival research on Willa Cather)

Summer Research Grant, University of Mississippi, 2015 -(annual research grant awarded to a small group of researchers)

Outstanding Thesis Award, Eastern Illinois University, 2006

Rex Syndergaard Scholarship, Eastern Illinois University, 2001 -(annually awarded to a single student in the History Department)

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

“Willa Crasher: Speed, Modernism, and Crash Aesthetics in Cather’s Fiction,” Willa Cather International Seminar, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 2017.

Panel Moderator, “Race, History, Memory,” Memory and Prophecy in the Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945 Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, May 2017.

“Mississippi on the Potomac: Sutpen’s Hundred as Washington D.C. in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” Faulkner and Hemingway Conference, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, October 2016.

Panel Moderator, “Global, Regional, Local,” Faulkner and Hemingway Conference, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, October 2016.

Panel Moderator, “Revisiting the 19th Century,” Southern Writers, Southern Writing Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford MS, July 2016.

“The Biblical Art of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*: Psalm 47 and U.S. Imperialism,” Willa Cather International Seminar, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, June 2015.

“A Tale of Two Preachers: the Book of Ezekiel in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*,” Faulkner and Hurston Conference, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, October 2014.

“Teaching on the College Level (Roundtable),” Southern Writers, Southern Writing Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, July 2014.

“Surviving as a Graduate Student (Roundtable),” Southern Writers, Southern Writing Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, July 2014.

“‘That Obliterating Strangeness’: The Prairie Sublime in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*,” Willa Cather Spring Conference, Red Cloud, Nebraska, June 2014.

“Populism, *Ressentiment*, and Identity Politics in Tom Franklin’s *Hell at the Breech*,” South Central Modern Language Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, October 2013.

- “Identity Politics and Grit Lit: Tom Franklin’s *Hell at the Breech*,” Southern Writers, Southern Writing Conference, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi, July 2013.
- “Thomas Sutpen’s ‘Solitary Furnace Experience’: Postcolonialism and William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Faulkner and Warren Conference, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, October 2012.
- “The Book of Daniel in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” South Central Conference on Christianity and Literature, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 2011.
- “Elements of Secondary Education in English Higher Education,” colloquium for EIU English graduate students, Charleston, Illinois, April, 2005.
- “Technology in the Composition Class,” colloquium for EIU English Department, Charleston, Illinois, November 2005.
- “Tracing Virag: The Impact of Jewish Migration upon *Ulysses*,” Midwest Modern Language Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 2005.
- “Do I (We) Have a Future: Exploring the Crisis in the Humanities,” Illinois Philological Association, Springfield, Illinois, April 2005.