

## *Research Article*

# Fascism on the Plains in "Capital City"

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**Abstract:** Mari Sandoz, Western writer and Great Plains historian, uncovered issues that the individual finds in negotiating the corrupt community or state in the Midwest. Her 1939 text, *Capital City*, depicts a corrupt allegorical Midwestern city and captures the ways in which the individual, as part of a larger social unit, fights for power in the community and for equal rights versus a corrupt state. *Capital City* is a part of her efforts to advocate for disenfranchised farmers, laborers, and workers of the Great Plains region. Her work clearly explicates how individuals with a common ideology can function within a community or social unit to unite for social protest. My research will ascertain how Sandoz's historical fiction comments on the rights of the worker and, more importantly, the effect of her writing. Keywords: western writer, historical fiction, individual versus community, workers' rights.

## **Introduction**

Proletarian novels of the 1930s clearly demonstrate issues that the individual finds in negotiating the corrupt community or state. Mari Sandoz's *Capital City*, published in 1939, depicts a corrupt allegorical city, Franklin, in the state of Kanewa, and captures the ways in which the individual, as part of a larger social unit, fights for power in the community and for equal rights versus a corrupt state. Franklin's capitalist structure attempts at every turn to deter the proletarian work force that is attempting to implement cooperatives, fair farmers' initiatives, and labor unions. Through the process of the proletarian fight for these changes pursuing equality, the corrupt, seedy government of Franklin is plainly exposed. Within Franklin's corrupt structure, there are several contingencies and individuals that utilize varied tactics to strive for change and to challenge the government. Both men and women of varied class positions and employment work together in order to achieve equality and fairness for the working class and impoverished. The varied ways they approach the problem of the corrupt government are ultimately unsuccessful, but the novel clearly explicates how individuals with a common ideology can function within a community or social unit. Ultimately, although the battle waged against Franklin is unsuccessful, the novel itself serves to challenge the corrupt politics subsequent to the Great Depression throughout the Midwest.

Sandoz was particularly interested in the ways the individual could operate within the fascist-like government she believed was forming in the heartland. As Stephen Greenwell affirms in his critical assessment of Sandoz's two allegorical novels, *Slogum House* and *Capital City*, "Sandoz deals with subjects of great and enduring concern to her – the will-to-power individual and the threat of fascism to modern society. It is significant that they were conceived and written during a period of acute economic crisis in the United States and

political and economic instability abroad” (Greenwell 134). Many novelists endeavored to explain and detail the social wrongs they witnessed and experienced: “As in the earlier Socialist fiction, a number of ‘motifs’ or themes appear in so many of these novels that they soon become predictable from book to book” (Rideout 199). This similarity in content is resultant from the political climate of the 1930s, which evidences much tension in America, particularly the Midwest.

Isolated from larger cities and ideas, Midwestern Americans read from scarce news sources and those sources they obtained contained ill-informed news articles that were not particularly unfavorable to Hitler and fascist forces. Sandoz maintained that one of the capital cities she based her text on, Lincoln, Nebraska, was a “parasite” (Qtd. in Stauffer, *Mari* 126). An explication of this derogative term is explained in her text when she states, “parasites were natural born fascist” (Sandoz 257). The fascist viewpoint was consistently depicted in newspapers and its prominence helped promote this sentiment across rural America. In her research for the *Capital City* manuscript, Sandoz noted the similarities in highlighted news disseminated across the Midwest: “In preparation Mari subscribed to newspapers from ten capital cities between the Mississippi and the Rockies, from Bismarck to Oklahoma City” (Stauffer, *Mari* 125). In examining the newspapers, “The similarity of both thought and content in these papers amazed her. In fact she claimed that if she not labeled the clippings she would have been unable to tell them apart” (Greenwell 141). The rural heartland’s media did not offer varying viewpoints for its readership. The idea that no one outside the enclave of rural America knew of the political climate and that these common sentiments existed in the heartland prompted her to write this novel: “She believed that in the future more attention would be paid to man as part of a social unit, the community” (Greenwell 140). *Capital City*

thrives in its careful examination of the social and individual units that interact to challenge the prominent ruling class.

What are the results of these social units and what do they attempt to achieve? While these groups were often accused of communism, they simply were trying to effect change for the betterment of their community. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes discussing the inoperative community:

the word: ,communism' stands as an emblem of the desire to discover or rediscover a place of community at once beyond social divisions and beyond subordination to technopolitical dominion, and thereby beyond such wasting away of liberty, of speech, or of simple happiness as comes about whenever these become subjugated to the exclusive order of privatization. (Nancy 1)

In Franklin, we see this communism begin to take shape. Although those that are working together against the fascists are not communists, they are working together solely to create a community. Nancy asks questions about community versus communism and here, too, the elite seems to struggle to understand what the proletariat was doing (Nancy 8). The individuals' attempts at forming stronger community bonds are misinterpreted as communistic ideas, although they are simply trying to work together. As Nancy further explains in his examination of the inoperative community,

the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*. An absolute immanence of man-- a humanity, -- and of community to community -- a communism. (Nancy 2)

These units struggle to work together but, as Nancy also explains, "these same voices that

were unable to communicate what, perhaps without knowing it, they were saying, were exploited” (Nancy 8). They work and strive for a change from the corrupt status quo, but are unable to posit any new real solutions or achieve any tangible goals. They are able to successfully critique the problematic aspects of their society, but do not put forth any type of solution. As Sandoz notes in a letter discussing the individuals in her text: “Abigail and the artists are not 2 people but represent 2 aspects of the arts lost in a decaying society – one type makes the compromises necessary in order to get physical escape, the other withdrawing into her own little world of history and the business of mother confessor so she need not face the world going to pot around her” (Qtd. in Stauffer, *Mari* 182). The individual, then, is limited in what they are able to accomplish successfully.

Franklin, Kanewa, Sandoz’s allegorical city, comments upon the workings of government and classism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, and most notably, Sandoz’s residence while writing the novel, Lincoln, Nebraska. Franklin’s capitol, as Lincoln’s does, features a prominent figure atop the capitol building and the street layouts in Franklin mirror Lincoln’s municipal layout. Lincoln is not the only city represented by Franklin, as Sandoz claimed this was a composite city illustrating not only Lincoln’s ills, but also those of the entire Midwest. Her publisher, Atlantic Press, was concerned about the possibility of libel and their lawyers mailed Sandoz a letter addressing their concerns. Sandoz replied to her publisher in a letter, writing: “Kanewa and Franklin are wholly creatures of my mind. They are broadly general to the trans-Mississippi region” (Qtd. in Stauffer, *Sandoz* 161). Sandoz’s novel provided timely commentary on the state of Nebraska and others she included in her composite city after the Great Depression. While the novel is arguably Sandoz’s most political, it received little critical acclaim because of the blunt way it depicts the sullied government which

materialized out of the Great Plains during the Great Depression and the extremism that emerged as a possible alternative. As Phillip Castille notes:

In *Capital City*, Sandoz's goal is to alert readers in the Northeast to this rightward shift in the heartland. In letters to her New York publisher in 1939, Sandoz described the widespread admiration for Hitler among her fellow Nebraskans and warned, 'You people in the East are probably not aware of the real danger of a growing fascist set-up in the middlewest' (Castille 133).

This concept is notable in the canon of proletarian literature, as Marcus Klein asserts: "Proletarian literature was a literary rebellion within a literary revolution, to which it was loyal. It had as its aim refreshment of that revolution by way of bringing it to a knowledge of current realities" (Klein 137). Sandoz's novel appropriately belongs with the proletarian classification as she, too, wished her work to inform and edify, as Sandoz writes in a letter to friend Vida Belk: "Some day *Capital City* may be recognized for what I meant it—a microcosmic study of the macrocosm that is our modern world" (Qtd. in Stauffer, *Letters* 182). Her novel's appeal lies in its applicability across the nation and even the world. In another letter, Sandoz noted its themes extending in relevance to other cities, especially after World War II, and Sandoz claimed she received many calls and letters stating, "Yes, we have *Capital City* all over the world" (Qtd. in Stauffer, *Mari* 182).

Sandoz negotiated the issue of the individual and the community through the intersection of the city itself as the primary protagonist/antagonist character. As Sandoz scholar Helen Stauffer asserts, "She wanted to experiment with an approach in which the main character was the city itself; the people were not to be individuals, but rather units in society" (Stauffer, *Mari Sandoz* 129). The city plays a prominent role as a character, especially through

its government and classist control structure. In considering the effects of the individuals and units in this society, it is imperative to first examine the ways in which this primary character, Franklin, functions and what operational units function within it.

Franklin's corruption runs deep, and the extent of this corruption peaks during the ten week buildup to the November 1938 election, the period detailed in the novel. In fact, its corruption originates in its inception as a capital city. In claiming the capital city crown, through [wringing] the capitol from Grandapolis "the corruptness seems to grow exponentially with each new politician and militia formed" (Sandoz 144). Fascist sentiments proliferate and government officials accept bribes, threaten challengers, and, in some cases, torture and kill to achieve their goals. Sandoz's plot in *Capital City* is one that could be compared with many other proletarian writers at this time period. Gordon Milne argues that the looming prospect of fascism incited many 1930s writers: "In the 1930's, Fascism abroad and the possibility of dictatorship at home aroused many a writer" (Milne 128). Sandoz, too, expresses concern for the possibility of fascism on the plains. In Franklin, the current governor is retiring, the lieutenant governor is indicted for crimes, and now only corrupt politicians are stepping into the governor and senatorial races. The Republican candidate, Johnson Ryon, has a son involved with the Gold Shirts, a pro-Nazi group that Sandoz utilizes to represent the Silver Shirts Legion, a group based upon Hitler's Brown Shirts which "sought to 'save' America by turning it into a Christian State" (Castille 135). The independent candidate, Charley Stettbetor runs on a Christian platform and speaks throughout to "thunder against the immorality of the students and the devilish plans of the International Jew bankers and Jew Reds, aided and abetted by the Scarlet Woman of the campus!" (Sandoz 314, 152). There is no legitimate, uncorrupt candidate until farm-labor candidate

Carl Halzer steps forward. The electorate's options are limited as most of the candidates are other incompetent or corrupt and tensions escalate over the growing labor movement, farmers' lack of support, and inequality between the working, destitute, and elite classes.

The primary characters of import in the novel include Dr. Abigail Allerton, a history professor at the Franklin university, and Hamm Rufe, a social outcast living in seclusion, despite his wealth and former elite status. Sandoz utilizes these two characters to battle individual fights against the corrupt state. Alongside these individuals are the farmers' association and labor strikers. The farmers' association, with member and senatorial candidate Carl Halzer, and the labor strikers, led by striker Lew Lewis, also attempt to combat Franklin's elite and corrupt ruling class in power that are eliminating any sense of morality in the capital city. These two individuals and two social units attempt to right the injustices done to them and others they find a sense of camaraderie with.

The Franklin government is wrought with over-expense and frivolity. Yet, most of the public is not aware of this corruption or willing to see it. The newspapers and public presentations and lectures articulate skewed stories that do not clearly explain what is going on in government. Similar to *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the 1939 Frank Capra film with a similar theme of graft in a rural state, when the newspapers are corrupted, it is difficult to get information to the people. This newspaper corruption is illustrated in *Capital City* when Purdy Wilson, from the Vigilant Taxpayers organization, comes to visit Hamm. During the visit, he secretly documents items in Hamm's house at Herb's Addition, a small Hooverville shantytown in Franklin, in order to suggestively imply that Hamm's belongings were extravagant. He captures a photo of a backless *Godey's* and notes Hamm's small radio during his visit to Hamm's shack and skews the story he sells to the *World*, claiming that all residents in Herb's



Additional were relaxing in luxury on the taxpayers dime: “But the next day the *World* carried a front-page story of government waste: single men living in luxury on relief, with fine radios, collecting art works and rare books” (Sandoz 193). Clearly, Hamm’s small shack is not extravagant and he has little personal belongings in it, but the article disseminated to the *World’s* readership, primarily the elite, receive the story that the poor are living extravagantly when they are, in reality, struggling to get by. As a consequence, it is difficult for the public to see what is going on and to reconcile the news they hear with the reality of the situation. This is just one example of many that illustrates the media reports skewed the public’s perception through their sole means of receiving news and information.

At the same time that this government corruption occurs, religious zealots develop as a right wing splinter faction in support of the current government’s methodologies and utilize the Christian platform to posit the government’s fascist leanings. Christian movements under the guise of improving the social condition, in actuality function to limit conducive discussion and silence those that veer from traditional discussion and viewpoints. One particular demonstration of this occurs after Dr. Abigail Allerton, a professor of history at the university, writes an exposé novel decrying the government’s back alley politics. Once the novel had been released, the Christian movement leapt at the opportunity to discredit Abigail and the churches followed suit, an astonishingly effective methodology to spread misinformation to the primarily Christian, rural masses:

When the church notices came in Friday there was scarcely a one that failed to list a Sunday sermon against Abigail – one opportunity for contemporary comment that would enrage no organized group. Several of the sermons were listed by the

book's name; one was on 'Realism versus Godliness in Current Books,' and one on 'The Viper in Our Bosom' (Sandoz 150).

Other activists in the community were harassed by this Christian right movement in different ways. The *Christian Challenger*, the right wing Christian newspaper in Franklin, begins to pick out other activists as potential 'Reds' in Franklin. Sandoz proves prescient in anticipating the second Red Scare tactics that would occur in 1945-1950 and echoed the first Red Scare endemic in 1919-1920 (Woods 20, Murray). In addition to these strategies, the Christian movement further continues to harass Hamm and others that speak to labor rights activists. They claim that activism that Hamm is involved with was a fight against God:

“under the door of his shack appeared the first issue of the *Christian Challenger*, but it was Jews and Reds this time who were the antichrists instead of the Catholics, and among them Hamm found his name and Carl Halzer's” (Sandoz 123). This splinter faction attempts to utilize religious scare tactics to bring the elite under their umbrella of ideology in order to fight against the uprising of the working masses.

The result of government ineffectiveness and contaminated traditional and religious media creates tension for those that desire more for their city. Different social structures, ethnicities, and job positions create spaces in which to function within the confines of the corrupt city. In *Capital City*, we see Sandoz placing herself in a position complicit with her characters' activism. In Franklin, the intellectual and the writer are able to successfully expose the ills of this corrupt society when they work together as a social unit. After their writings gain prominence, a fire is set destroying one of their homes. It is this fire that begins to shock some of the elite into a realization that there is corruption destroying Franklin internally: “By the evening after the fires there was considerable anger in the local papers. Somebody important seemed to be pushing a

demand for a real investigation” (Sandoz 305). Sandoz, too, attempts to expose unjustness by publishing her book amidst others that asked similar questions about society and government at that time. Sandoz utilizes two writers and intellectuals to fight for workers’ equality and government accountability. These two characters fight both as individuals and as a part of a larger units and communities. Their individual fights stem from their ostracized position directly created by their ideologies. This is a concept explored by Jean-Luc Nancy in his examination of the inoperative community, when he states, “But the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community” (Nancy 3). Their lack of community creates their individual endeavors for justice. In creating these individual agendas though, they both ultimately regain a sense of community, although this is a different type of community that has transgressed the boundaries of the former community.

Both Dr. Abigail Allerton and Hamm Rufe utilize their writing abilities to demonstrate the ills that have befallen the community. Sandoz herself “spoke of two of her characters as representing not two people, but two aspects of the artists in decaying society” (Qtd. in Stauffer, *Mari* 129). Sandoz’s employment of both Abigail and Hamm allows her to share her authorial intent through their actions. It is important to examine the characters that utilize art to effect change and to see the ways in which they are able to expound on the unjust treatment of their fellow residents. Class, gender, and race all play into the effectiveness of those attempting to effect change and societal consciousness. As Ezra Pound was quoted in 1922: “One ought to say it is the job of a great art to keep government in its place” (Qtd. in Aaron 115). Pound also indicated that this art should not, “tout one form of government in opposition to some other and Sandoz’s characters do not posit any solutions either” (Qtd. in Aaron 115). Sandoz’s character approach allows her two characters to fight her own fight in the novel. They are

responsible for righting injustices, but, at the same time, hesitate to offer any solution or elevate one government over another.

The evolving government and some of the potential electorate and candidates maintain fascist ideas and attempt to stomp out any form of equality for the working class. Yet, these two intellectuals and others attempt to create equality and are instrumental in promoting workers' strikes across the state and in forming and encouraging cooperatives that combat the emerging fascist, reactionary government. As Joseph Blotner asserts, "The fascists' failure in America sprang from several causes. Although they had friends in Congress, industry, and finance. Their crude, garbled, and savage philosophy had little charm for the intellectuals" (Blotner, *Modern* 238). Franklin's intellectuals, too, attempt to defeat the fascists as they clearly see through their dishonest ways.

While there are several distinctly functioning units that actively pursue this operative community, two intellectual characters are characterized in more concrete and distinct terms in the text. Sandoz very clearly outlines Abigail and Hamm, perhaps since Sandoz shared their attitudes and or felt camaraderie with them and their fight. Franklin's Dr. Abigail Allerton, a history professor at the university, writes the exposé history novel *Anteroom for Kingmakers*, delving into the dark world of government corruption and graft in Franklin. After the book's release, she receives plentiful inflammatory comments from the public. The university forces Abigail to resign her teaching position and she is resigned to seclusion in order to escape the hecklers' abuses. Hamm seeks out Abigail in order to combine forces and they begin a comradeship that brings their issues of interest to light. It is notable that Abigail releases her work into a public environment that believed, "Women shouldn't be allowed to drink, they told each other, or to see such things as the parade today. They ought to be protected, for they

were never really civilized, always hankering for the brute male no matter what their cultural background, training, or intellect” (Sandoz 58). As a consequence of this common positioning of women and her attitude toward the government, her work was immediately rejected as a wasted women’s tome. Yet, she found supporters in the community that wanted her to speak and some of those in communities outside of the corrupt Franklin city reveled in its honesty. At the end of the book, Abigail receives a telegram from Goldwyn confirming their purchase of her book (Sandoz 327).

In considering how Abigail functions in Franklin as a member of the larger female intellectual community, it is important to consider other women’s roles. A minor female character, Stephani, also emphasizes the importance of the fight of the individual. Joseph Blotner examined the roles of women in study of the political novel and determined, „As we have seen, women consistently appear as guides for the male protagonists. They act as spiritual and cultural mentors, attempting to infuse idealism into these creatures of coarser clay than their own, giving them books to read, exposing them to new ideas, and trying “to turn their thoughts to higher things” (Blotner, *Modern* 172). Stephani, who is actually Hamm’s separated wife, operates in this function as a helpmeet to both Carl Halzer, known as the Bellowing Bull of Bashan, the farm-labor candidate and also is involved with the labor strikes. Yet, Stephani operates beyond Blotner’s roles set forth for women. She actively contends with political movements across the country, fighting for laborers’ equality and farmer’s rights, even though her enthusiastic activism ultimately costs her her marriage to Hamm, which has essentially ended before the events of this race in 1938. Thus she does capture what Blotner asserts is the “helpmeet or ,Woman as Guide but in a more assertive role than Blotner characterizes women in the political novel at this time” (Blotner, *Modern* 173).

Women function in a great degree to bring to light the political corruption that fights against the proletarian workforce. Hamm Rufe's character also works for this goal and his actions and attitude provide a perspective of great interest. He is a representative of numerous social units simultaneously as social outcast, Hamm Rufe, and also Rufer Hammond, heir to a Franklin newspaper fortune. Rufer had been involved with the labor movement extensively and during one particularly violent protest march received a blow to the face that rendered him almost unrecognizable. After recovering from the disfiguring wound, he returns to his hometown, assumes the name Hamm Rufe, an alternate identity, and abandons his roots and his family name: "Hamm Rufe who lived out at Bums' Roost and wrote dirty articles about the employers for the labor papers and the *Nation*?" (Sandoz 190). He moves to the Herb's Addition shantytown and lives minimally and unrecognizably while working in a cooperative store owned by Samuel Tyndale, a local businessman. His ability to blend in with other outcasts creates a community he can operate out of to share his writings about abuses to the working class.

Although he has assumed the role of a social outcast, his work thrives from his outcast position. He submits articles to the *Nation* and sends scoops about labor movements and activism to the Grandapolis newspapers, despite being a major shareholder in the corrupt Franklin *World* newspaper: "So he kept on writing about the workingman, the growing unemployment that brought wage cuts, strikes, organized strikebreaking, and violence" (Sandoz 118). His position as a social outcast allows him more freedom than the other elite depicted in this novel, in that he operates outside of their social world and constructed rules.

To illustrate the world of the leftist elite, one needs only to examine the world of Hamm's mother, Hallie Rufer Hammond. Although she pleads for the rights of the

impoverished and working classes, she is unable to publicly make such statements. She praises Abigail's book quietly and not publicly, just in a personal letter that strove to "apologize or the stupidity of her townsmen and say how sorry she was that her father, George Rufer, could not have lived to see the fine job Miss Allerton had made of the old Frontier House story" (Sandoz 152). She also helps the residents of Herb's Addition after the Gold Shirts burn the entire shantytown down, but did not claim any credit for doing so. Only Hamm knows that she had done so, as he was aware that the donated ground for the rebuilding site had previously belonged to his grandfather (Sandoz 313). Thus, his mother ultimately shows some compassion toward the impoverished working classes and the fight against corruption, but she is constrained by her class position and gender and unable to publically admit her position or risk her status as an elite woman in the community.

Hamm shows pride in those that challenge the common misperceptions the Franklinites held. After Abigail's book is published, "Hamm Rufe was pleased with the book, amazed to see so much that he vaguely knew brought to such reality by an outsider. Abigail had made a sound protagonist of the hotel and its three main employees" (Sandoz 146). Hamm fights for his city, founded by his grandfather in a more moral time, and wishes for its best. Hamm's position, looking in from the outside of the elite class, provides depth of understanding to the inner workings of that circle. As Greenwell argues, "he is able to give the reader the advantage of seeing the town through the eyes of one who knows the people but is no longer part of them" (Greenwell 142). It is Hamm's informed position that the reader trusts in dissecting the inner workings of this corrupt community. Hamm's experience in transgressing the classist boundaries in his thought process allows him to create emboldened articles that reach the audience he seeks to motivate the most. His inside

information also helps to serve his argument, as he can provide firsthand accounts of what he witnessed in elite circles. Blotner asserts that there is a differentiation between individual and group behavior in the political novel: “It is hard to draw the line between individual and group political behavior. A man may be a mirror or conductor of political forces as well as a discrete individual. His motivation is perhaps the most individual aspect of his political experience” (Blotner, *Political* 79). Here, we see Hamm operating primarily outside of the group but working to motivate that group. His position allows him a unique perspective and ability and one that boosts the labor movement to action. Hamm is inextricably tied with the labor movement as he fought for their rights throughout his life and continues to so do after adopting his new identity. His roots in fighting for the labor unions derive from his Grandfather, the original owner of the *World* and one of Franklin’s founding fathers. Hamm fights for the labor unions and his actions with others involved with the labor movement fight showcase how individuals band together to form a more successful social unit.

The individuals’ fight is relatively ineffective unless joined with a community, which ultimately is what Sandoz demonstrates in her communities of individuals that operate as a unit for social change. While Sandoz sets out two individual characters as primary protagonists, along with the city itself, the other activists in this work function distinctly as units. The labor movement is represented heavily throughout the text and we see the ways in which individuals work as a unit to effect change with this group. Initially, the labor unions are restricted by the inability to picket and fight for fair working hours and rights. On Labor Day, Lew Lewis, decides to initiate a strike parade. Banners proclaim: “ANTI-PICKETING LAW IS POISON TO LABOR MILLIONS FOR THUGS, NOTHING FOR TRUCKERS, SAY BOSSES KANEWA: BLACK SPOT IN TWELVE STATE REGION PAY LABORER



SO HE CAN BUY FROM FARMER” (Sandoz 35). The government was not receptive to this show of force and police were called in to handle the striking workers. During the mayhem that ensues, the police shoot Lew and maliciously club and strike the other workers. This scene demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the strikers and how they are limited by their social class and position. They struggle to establish themselves as honest, hard working individuals, despite newspaper accounts and reports to the contrary, Lew announces: “We’re no hoodlums and rowdies making trouble. We’re good American citizens, only asking what’s our right” (Sandoz 254). Throughout the text, the strikers attempt to alter their strategy. Their new approach is to advocate from a safety perspective. In a later strike, the placards proclaim, “Your LIFE is in the hands of one doctor and in the hands of every TRUCKER on the highways. Help him keep it SAFE by giving him a decent WAGE for decent HOURS” (Sandoz 130). The strikers, through working in concert, do end up demonstrating that they are an important body to consider.

‘There’s no sense in fighting labor,’ Bill Colder, for fifty years a bridge builder in Kanewa, often told the rest. ‘When you once get your eyes open so you can see your nose before your face you’ll know that a well-paid workingman is your best guarantee of a steady customer. His money is the circulating kind’ (Sandoz 256).

Despite these small, auspicious gains for their rights, the striking truckers never do see equality in the text and the novel ends with their ultimate defeat and Hamm’s tragic death in the arms of his mother.

The proletarian workforce is clearly disempowered in this text and they achieve little success in their quest for equality. Despite their consistency in fighting for rights, as Lew says at the second parade, “Hold it, fellows, hold that line,” they never achieve fair working hours

and wages (Sandoz 341). They fight for equality and their plight seems reasonable, as workers have died due to long working hours and unfair wages. Several truckers sleep at the wheel and one is involved in a devastating accident that kills four people after driving for sixteen hours straight: “The trucker was accused of sleeping at the wheel and he admitted that he must have, but he had been driving sixteen hours steady and two-thirty in the morning was a damn treacherous time for a tired man” (Sandoz 129). Yet, the strikers witness no change to their wages or hours and the fascists end up overpowering the strikers yet again in a violent victory that yields Hamm’s tragic and violent death.

Farmers work hand in hand with the labor workers to attempt equality but also function individually to work as a united unit to fight for the injustices against them. Many individual farmers do not feel as though they are able to fully effect change, but their united faction of the Farmers’ Association attempts equality. Cash Overtill, Hamm’s favorite neighbor in the addition, was a former farmer, “Although he was a good farmer, he was permanently blacklisted because he marched on the capitol back in 1933 with the rest and could not get any free land or any company owned land” (Sandoz 115). Although he realizes the injustices done to him, he realizes he has no effect on the elite class and their decisions in government. Other farmers attempt to silently fight their unjust treatment. Most of them do not have the will to fight against the injustice as they realize their battle will be fruitless.

Yet, some attempt some types of quiet rebellions. After Gilson, the farm representative for the Kanewa Investment Company, told Chuck Overtill, a local farmer, that they were shutting down its 2500 farms unless they voted for keeping Dunn Powers out of government since the investors needed to be protected. In this instance, the farmer did not revolt, but simply walked off his farm and left his share. Chuck did not want to farm for uncorrupt

people: “I moved off and left my share there. They always get the cream anyhow. By damn, says I, let Gilson, the old tripe-gut, bust his own back getting the corn out?” (Sandoz 296). In this way, the farmer realizes his commodity is important, as is his skill, but the only way to achieve any type of recourse is to simply stop doing the work. There seems to be nothing that the farmer can do to right the injustices done to him.

Carl Halzer is the exception to these cases, and stands up for farmers’ rights on his own. Carl’s family struggled throughout their life to maintain on the farm: “They were right, for the east never let the land pay us enough for a decent birth and dying, and a decent living, too” (Sandoz 164). When the opportunity presents itself for new senatorial leadership in Kanewa, Carl steps up as the farmer’s representative after prodding from one of the leaders of a group of farmers, Victor Heeley. Carl realizes that the corrupted, moneyed interest voters would vote against him, but Heeley argues:

the same ones that are always against the laboring man. And against every damn dirt-scratching farmer too. That’s why we don’t think you could do much in the statehouse, with our reactionary legislature selling themselves out without even knowing it. Washington is the place for you. And I believe it should be in the senate – get that son of a bitch of a Bullard out (Sandoz 74-5).

Carl, “looked into the sunburnt faces of discriminatory rates and legislation capped by ten years of depression, drouth, hot winds, and grasshoppers. ‘I’ll try it—’ he said” (Sandoz 75). Finally, a farmer has stepped up to address the unfairness and ill treatment against the dictatorial forces controlling them and attempts to insert a voice truly representing the Kanewa people at the federal level.

Carl’s ability to stimulate change or win the election is implausibility. Some of the

farmers are even against him, as even though he runs on a platform that advocates for a federal farm program, his farm colleagues are unpersuaded that the Bellowing Bull of Bashan will be effective at the federal level. The farmers were upset that previous initiatives had yielded them no greater opportunities or assistance in years of trouble: “They had been burned once by listening to a Washington outfit, Hoover’s Farm Board. Millions of dollars had been handed out, but did the farmers ever see a red cent of it? No, by God. ‘If you want to help a tree grow you got to get the water to the roots’” they proclaimed (Sandoz 164). In addition to the brewing agitation resultant from previous initiatives, Carl’s struggle is complicated by the association he hopes to advocate for at the federal government level. Stephani, Carl, and Hamm suspect that both the Farmers’ Association and the *Midwest Farmer* are backed by the Associate Manufacturers of America (Sandoz 313). Thus, even though Carl has the farmers best interests in mind, not only will his association hinder his path to winning the election, but other previous initiatives have fomented discontent amongst the group he hopes to represent, even though his goals and plans are innovative and have the farmers’ best interests in mind.

There is little reference in Sandoz’s work as to how race and ethnicity integrates into the politics of Franklin. The references to race and ethnicity only indicate the disempowerment these individuals maintained in this city governed by Gold Shirts and active klansmen. The only mention of ethnicity demonstrates the little power those categorized as other have. The city’s two refugee children are adopted by a doctor and local academic. José is a young boy from Spain taken in by Dr. Russ Snell and Professor Walfords adopts Isaac, from Germany (Sandoz 125). After the two boys were adopted, the local newspaper claimed these two and others promoting the adoption of these immigrants were: “Flooding the country with undesirable aliens and taking the bread out of the mouths of white men!” they said, and

“Bringing in Reds and Jews to cut the throats of our sons and rape our daughters!” (Sandoz 126). The treatment of these two orphan boys evidence how diminished a role any person singled out as ethnically different must have had in this homogenous community. The elite community acts as if immigration will threaten their positions. Their mistreatment of these ‘outsiders’ attempt to keep them disempowered. In addition to these references to those ethnically different, a particular poignant reference to race is made when 14 year old Sadie Cooper fell from a hotel window after drinking inside of the Buffalo Hotel. No one made any movement to help the young woman, except for one person: “For a moment everybody stood away from her, only the doorman thinking to help the girl inside; then, remembering his color, he dropped his dark hands from her arm and stood helpless too” (Sandoz 205). The man’s response to this situation illustrates how any person of any other ethnicity already knew they had no power amidst those in the ruling party. The doorman realized that his position in society as well as his race did not afford him the opportunity to comment on the situation. He was one individual against a mass, thus demonstrating the limiting effect of the power of the individual.

The idea of race was most directly addressed by artist, Lou Rickert. When his art show opened, the *World* newspaper denounced his Bereaved Madonna painting, “But calling a Negro woman, with Glen Doover’s Franklin Creamery plainly recognizable in the background, a Madonna, that was sacrilege” (Sandoz 216). The *World* also took issue with the painting of two homeless children in front of the Capitol Vista. “But they are there, you know”, Rickert claimed, and his work movingly depicts how these homeless and impoverished children were denigrated and that those of color and also those of lower social standing existed in the community (Sandoz 217). The concept of this artist attempting to

challenge the traditional notions of Christianity are discussed by Milne: “Do they succeed in delivering their message- artistically or otherwise- and in causing people to act upon this message” (Milne 183). Milne argues no and quotes Charles I. Glicksburg, “Readers have been awakened but not pushed into action” (Milne 184). This idea could be applied not only to Rickert’s painting, but Sandoz’s work as well. The artist in Franklin attempts to depict real life, yet the public viewers shut his viewpoint down. Similarly, Sandoz is chastised for this work by her community, despite its basis in fact.

Ultimately, the questions that Sandoz asks in this novel were largely ignored by critics of her time. Her apartment was ransacked and she was driven from the community as a result of this work, which many of her Lincoln, Nebraska community members took as inflammatory: “Driven by conviction, she also believed a door was closing on the possibility of real democracy” (Kocks 91). Her work succeeds in considering both the individual and collective in considering social protest. While her work succeeds in pointing out the blatant corruption and demonstrates clear methods for attempting to right injustices. Her work does not succeed in pushing people into action, as she’d hoped.

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